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SOPHIE HALENCZIK, AMERICAN

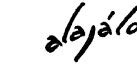

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SOPHIE HALENCZIK, AMERICAN

by

ROSE C. FELD

DRAWINGS BY



LITTLE, BROWN AND COMPANY · BOSTON
1943

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FIRST EDITION

Published May 1943

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

FOR MY MOTHER

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SOPHIE HALENCZIK, AMERICAN

1

Sophie's Son Goes to Camp

SOPHIE HALENCZIK COMES TO OUR HOUSE ONCE A week to give us a thorough cleaning. As a rule, her son, Frankie, who is twenty-one, brings her out from town in his car. Frankie's car is almost as old as he is, but with the cajolery that is in his hands, Frankie keeps it going. Sophie is very proud of this, in spite of the fact that it takes

most of Frankie's time. Whenever we have tried to get Frankie to do some work for us, he invariably answers that he's got the car to fix. So distasteful is the offer of gainful occupation to Frankie that for several months now he has taken to stopping his car at the top of the hill and letting Sophie walk the quarter of a mile down to our house. Sophie shakes her head at this, but not with too much anger. To her Bohemian mind, menfolk are superior and Frankie has always enjoyed privileges of irresponsibility never accorded to her three daughters.

When I read Frankie's name in the list of draftees in the town *Gazette,* I wondered how Sophie would get to us after he left for camp and how she felt about having her son in the Army. This, I should add, was before Japan attacked Pearl Harbor. Sophie answered both questions with the simplicity and directness which are her outstanding qualities.

"I fix it good," she said. "After Frankie goes, you come to Jordan's in the morning and you take me there when I get through with work. No?"

Jordan's is a general store which has miraculously survived the invasion of the chain units in our town. Old residents deal there because they have always done so, summer people because it seems the smart thing to do. They like buying nails and grass seed at one counter and meat and groceries at another. Jordan's is about five miles from our house and about two from Sophie's.

"We all must do something for defense of America. No?" she went on, clearly putting the matter of transportation up to me as a patriotic duty.

"How'll you get home from Jordan's?" I asked, almost shamed by her attitude into offering to take her all the way.

"I get," she replied cheerfully. "Always there is somebody at Jordan's who go down my road. When they know Frankie is in the Army, they take me."

Her attitude surprised and tantalized me, for other mothers I knew, those of deeper national roots, had found it difficult to respond with grace to the defense program of the country.

Sophie came from a land that had had compulsory military service for a long time, but from all I had read, I gathered that it was never considered anything but a necessary and unpleasant duty and lucky was the man who could escape it. Frankie could have applied for exemption, claiming to be the support of his widowed mother, but apparently neither Sophie nor he had considered such an application desirable.

"Do you like Frankie's going off to the Army?" I asked her. "Do you want him to be a soldier?"

"In the old country I hate soldiers," she replied gravely. "But here is different. Everything is good. Look at Mary. And look at Irene and Annie. Look what America do for them. So it is right Frankie should be a soldier."

"What about Mary and Irene and Annie? What did America do for them?" I asked, knowing that her answer would take time off from the floor and windows but that it would not be time wasted.

"I say, 'Look at Mary,' and then I say, 'Look

at Irene and Annie,'" Sophie corrected me, indicating by her inflection that there was a difference. I nodded, although I didn't see it. "You know about my Mary," she went on. "I tell you about her long time ago. No?"

Everybody who knew Sophie knew about Mary. She was eighteen when she came to this country and to our town with her widowed mother and the rest of the family. She found a job immediately as a hired girl and within a year had a baby, a little girl. She left the child, whom for some strange reason she christened Dolores, with her mother and went to work in another home. Dolores was now ten years old. People knew who her father was, but there was nothing that could be done about it. He was married and a respected member of the community. Possessed of some special dignity of her own, Mary Halenczik was also a respected member of the community. She was a good worker and a devoted mother.

These things went through my mind, and I indicated to Sophie that she could assume I knew about Mary and carry on from there.

"Well," said Sophie, "she get in trouble because she is a foreigner. She is a foreigner and she is old-fashioned."

That was one way of looking at it and I didn't see any point in disagreeing, if this was how Sophie felt.

"And Irene and Annie are Americans," I prompted.

"Yes," she answered, smoothing her apron. "Annie more better than Irene. You know about Irene?"

I did and I didn't know about Irene. There had been a little mystery about Sophie's second daughter. She had left home to get a job in a factory in Bridgeport, which is a little over twenty miles from our town. This was not unusual. Many of the local girls do that, for there is nothing they can turn to here to earn a living. Irene, Sophie used to report to us, made good wages and lived with the family of a friend who worked with her. On Sundays, whenever she could get a lift in a car or a truck that was coming this way, Irene visited her family, and

she always impressed them with her clothes and bright American chatter.

About six months ago, Sophie announced, in the midst of polishing our silver, that Irene was getting married at St. Francis' Church the following Sunday. I was mildly astonished. As a rule, Sophie casts the shadow of coming events weeks before they occur. We know all about the birthdays of her children, her wedding anniversary, and the anniversary of her husband's death. Such things are important to Sophie and she thrives on them both in anticipation and in retrospect.

When I said, "It's pretty sudden, isn't it?" Sophie, with a queer look made up in part of shrewdness and in part of triumph, answered, "No, not sudden. The baby is four months old."

And that's all she would say, although she knew I was eager to hear more. For the first time in the five years I had known her, Sophie preferred polishing silver and waxing floors to talking. The only details I got about that wedding I read in the *Gazette* the following week. It said, "The bride was simply but becomingly

dressed in a blue tailored suit," and that "the happy newlyweds are going to New York for their wedding trip." Of course, nothing was said about the baby.

So when Sophie asked me whether I knew about Irene, I said reproachfully, "All I know is that she's the married one."

For a moment I was afraid she was going to let it rest right there again, but she must have remembered that she was, in a manner of speaking, holding a brief for the defense of American democracy.

"I tell you," she said. "You like labor unions? No?"

"Well, sure," I answered. "Sure I like labor unions."

"Good," said Sophie approvingly. "You know, in the old country we have no labor unions."

She knew she was confusing me and I could see that she was relishing it.

"All right, I tell you," she finally declared. "I tell you. Irene, she work in the factory at Bridgeport. She make good wages. She look nice and stylish, real American. You never seen

my Irene. No? All right. Never mind. Well, she go to socials in Bridgeport and she meet George. George, he work in machine shop. He make fine wages. George's people come from Hungary, but George is born in Bridgeport. He is real American. He don't need citizen paper. Born American. No?"

"Yes," I agreed. "George is a born American."

"Well, you know what happens," Sophie continued, her voice lowered to a note of fatalism. "Irene get in trouble with George. I find out about it and I think, 'All right. That is life. It make no difference if a girl work in a house or if she work in a factory. If there is a man, she get in trouble.' No?"

I shrugged my shoulders in a way that didn't commit me. Sophie's lips opened in a wide grin.

"It make a difference," she said. "Oh, yes, it make a difference. Irene get in trouble, but the labor union help her."

The expression on my face must have amused her, for she laughed out loud and added, "Yes, sir, after the baby is born the labor union help her."

"But Sophie," I said, "I never heard of such a thing. Labor unions don't bother about such things."

Sophie waved her forefinger quickly back and forth before her nose several times, and the gesture was somehow highly eloquent in saying that these were complex and devious things we were discussing.

"No, they don't bother about such things," she agreed. "But Irene learn from them. George is a fine feller, but he is thickheaded. What you call stubborn. All Hungarians are like that. He say he like Irene but he don't want to get married. Irene beg and cry and tell him the baby look like him, but George just don't do nothing. 'What's the rush?' he say. He tell her to go back home and someday he come for her. But Irene stay right there in Bridgeport with the baby. She pay three dollar a week extra to the lady she live with for the baby's board. She don't bring that baby home to me. She is no fool, my Irene. She is smart. She is no more a foreigner. Oh, no. She know there been many strikes in Bridgeport. In front of the factories

men and girls – what you call them, pickers? No, pick-its – walk with signs. And then the bosses settle. No?"

"Yes," I said.

"Yes," Sophie continued, her voice warm with pride in her offspring. "Irene, she put little George in a baby carriage and over him she put a sign which say GEORGE ODANOS IS UNFAIR TO BABY. Irene make this sign herself and put it over the carriage. Every day, lunchtime, all dressed up fine, she go to the machine shop and she walk this way and that way before the door. All the men what work with George they come out, and when they see her they laugh and they pat her on the shoulder. They say she is a great girl. At first, George he get mad like hell, and then, when he see the other men think Irene is pretty smart, he come out one day and he say, 'O.K., kid. You win.' "

Sophie's palms went out in a gesture of happy conclusion.

"Nice. No?" she asked me, pleased with her tale and pleased with the effect she was making in telling it. "Can this happen in the old coun-

try?" she continued. "No. Only in America. Only in this wonderful country."

"You bet," I agreed, moved by other emotions besides patriotism. "You're absolutely right. And Irene is a smart girl. Now, what about Annie? You said something about her, too."

Sophie's eyes lost their shrewdness and grew tender.

"Ah, Annie," she said softly. "Annie is my baby. Annie is eight year old when we come to this country. She graduate public school. Annie is all right. She work in beauty parlor. She don't get into no trouble." Sophie shook her head in pleased contemplation of Annie. "Not my Annie," she went on. "Annie is engaged to a Yankee. She say his family been in this country two hundred year. Can you imagine? Two hundred year! Last Christmas he give Annie a diamond ring. Oh, yes, Annie is real American. She have her baby after she is married, maybe a whole year after, maybe two. That is what she say. She show them."

And then, lest I get the impression that Annie looked down on her own family, Sophie added


GEORGE ODANOS
IS
UNFAIR TO
BABY

quickly, "Don't think she is a stuck-up, my Annie. Oh, no. She is good like a good piece of bread. She is crazy about Dolores. She take her to the beauty parlor and give her a permanent for a birthday present. You know what Annie say? She say Dolores must go to high school. She say she must go to high school and get a job in an office. That's fine. No? More and more American."

"That's fine," I agreed. "There's no reason why she shouldn't do that."

"You know what I think?" said Sophie, moved by my answer to take me further into her confidence. "Dolores go to work in an office and marry her boss. That is what I think maybe will happen."

It was clear that in Sophie's mind the personal affairs of her daughters were the steps marking the growing Americanization of her family. Mary, the oldest, had come burdened, as Sophie declared, by Old World tradition; Irene had not been entirely free of this handicap, but using a weapon that the American fac-

tory had put into her hands, she had come out on top, so to speak. Annie, who had gone to the public schools, would accept nothing but the best, and Dolores would go to high school and marry her boss.

Here, then, lay the answer to Sophie's delight about Frankie's going into the Army. But now that I understood it, I was still curious about one thing. From what I knew of Frankie, he was not the sort of young man to be fired by gratitude for gifts lavished on his womenfolk.

"So Frankie is going to camp because of his sisters," I said, knowing that Sophie would set me straight.

Her eyebrows knit in perplexity as she weighed the obviously new idea and then, with complete honesty, she answered, "No. I don't know why he want to go. Maybe it is because he wear a uniform." She smiled. "You know what he say, that young devil? He say he knock the girls cold. I bet he break plenty hearts. He just like his father." She remained silent for a moment, dwelling, no doubt, on the memory of Frankie's father. Then she continued, abandon-

ing the father in favor of the son, "Maybe he want to go because his friends go. Anyway, he come to me and he ask me and I say to him, 'Ain't you an American, Frankie? Sure you go.' I don't need him to stay home for me. All he do is fix the car. I work anyway. And when I go to Jordan's everybody in the store know I have a son in the Army."

Before I could say anything her face suddenly lit up with the nearest thing to complete joy I have ever seen on a human countenance.

"I just think of something," she said in a hushed voice. "I don't go to public school, I don't go to labor union, I don't have citizen paper. But I am American. When Frankie go to camp, the *Gazette* take my picture with Frankie just like they do with American ladies, and they say under the picture 'Sophie Halenczik and Her Soldier Son.' No?"

2

Sophie Halenczik's Greenhorns

THE DAY THAT FRANKIE HALENCZIK WENT OFF TO camp as a draftee was one of festivity for his mother, Sophie. It was also one of deep spiritual exaltation, for it marked the beginning of our Connecticut town's recognition of Sophie as an American. First there had been a family dinner

at noon, consisting of mighty servings of goulash and egg noodles, Frankie's favorite meat dish, followed by huge platters of strudel filled with apples and chopped nuts, Frankie's favorite dessert. And, after dinner, the photographer from the *Gazette,* our town's weekly newspaper, came to Sophie's house and took a picture of her and Frankie under the American flag which draped their doorway. The picture was published two days later over a caption which must have been inspired by Sophie's guardian angel: "Proud American Mother Bids Smiling Farewell to Soldier Son."

Sophie, who comes to us on Friday, had difficulty in attending to her tasks that week. She carried the clipping of the newspaper in her apron pocket and took it out every few minutes to look at it, with the same proud smile the *Gazette* photographer had caught. At noon at our house she propped the picture against the sugar bowl and kept her eyes on it while she ate.

"Is wonderful. No?" she asked me as she pored over the miracle of the two-column cut.

"Me, Sophie Halenczik, proud American mother."

"Well, you are. I never saw a prouder one."

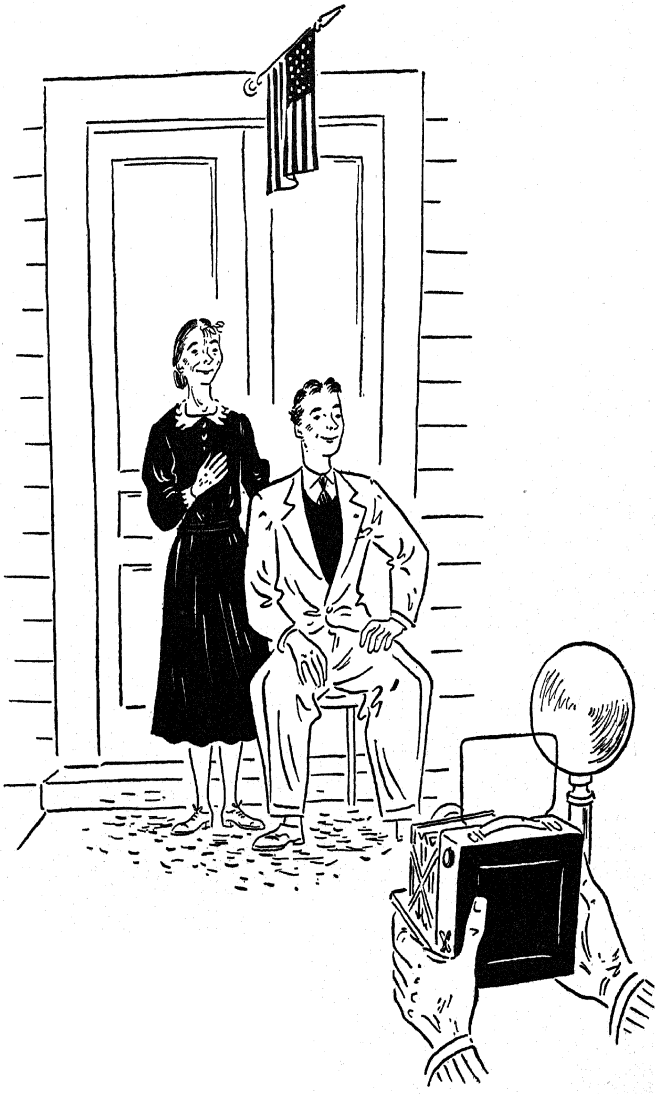
"Look," she said, touching her face in the picture. "My hair. All over my eyes. I was so excited."

"That makes it more natural," I said. "It's good of both of you, though Frankie looks very serious."

Sophie chuckled. "Not serious," she explained. "He was mad." She chuckled again, in obvious enjoyment of a private thought. I was naturally curious to know what it was all about, but, as usual, Sophie withheld her information until she could give it as a special favor in response to a request.

"What was Frankie mad about?" I asked her, capitulating, as she knew I would.

"The family," she answered. "You know, we have big dinner with good cooking like the kind Frankie ain't goin' to get in the Army. Nine at the table." She counted them off on her fingers. "Me and Frankie," she began, "then Mary and Irene and Annie and Dolores," she



went on. "That six. Then Kathi and the two boys." I had forgotten about Kathi and the two children. They were cousins of Sophie's, recently arrived from Europe, and were living with the Halenczik's until Kathi's husband, Paul, who had just got a job in a shoe factory in Massachusetts, could make a home for them.

"When the photographer come for the picture," Sophie continued, "they all want to be in it. So Frankie get mad." She shook her head in smiling memory of the incident. "He just like his father – " she made a sign of the cross – "when he get mad. He don't care how he talk. He say he ain't goin' to be in no picture with a lot of greenhorns. He mean his cousins. Not nice. No?"

"No," I agreed.

"So to make things good, I say nobody be in except me." Sophie looked slyly at me from under her lowered eyelids. "Anyway, I like it better that way. Just Frankie and me. So that why he look so serious. He just mad like his father. Like to have things his own way."

Before she left, Sophie asked if she could cut

out the picture from our copy of the *Gazette*. "I like to get a whole lot," she explained. "I keep them for Frankie's children. They be proud someday. No?"

That Sophie's world would have new horizons I realized from the moment I saw her assume the role of proud American mother. But my imagination fell short of Sophie's ambitions and energy. Each week she came to us she had some new interest or activity to report. Our town is extremely war-conscious, and there are about a dozen committees engaged in one kind of work or another. The women sew, they knit, they raise money for medical supplies, for ambulances, for refugees in England, and for refugees in this country. Most of the women I know who participate in this work limit their activities to one or two organizations. Sophie, as far as I could gather from her reports, joined all of them. She gave of her free time and her strength with extravagant generosity and enthusiasm. Glibly she spoke of the chairman of this committee and the chairman of that com-

mittee, mentioning the names of the pillars of our town's society with easy familiarity. There was nothing sycophantic about this. Sophie was happy not because she was mingling with the town's first families but because these native Americans were taking her into the fold. Late in the afternoon and in the evening, after her day's work in some home was over, Sophie sewed and ironed and patched clothes that were being sent abroad, and Sophie sold tickets for benefit concerts at our town hall, and Sophie waited on table and washed dishes at benefit suppers.

Because it made the greatest demand upon her willingness to serve, Sophie was happiest with the committee that sent clothes and medical supplies to refugee children in England. It was at a meeting of this committee that she made the dramatic disclosure which gave her unprecedented popularity in our town. I was not there and can only report what I heard from friends who were, and from Sophie herself. But first I must explain something about the committee and its chairman.

* * *

When, after the first heavy bombings of London, it was announced that England was planning to send large groups of children to America for the duration of the war, our town at once organized a committee to help out in this project. Unanimously chosen as chairman of the group was Mrs. Thornton Scudder, leader of our town's social register by reason of birth, wealth, and European background. Her husband, who had died in London the year before, had been in the Diplomatic Service and had held important posts in many of the capitals of Europe. When, after thirty years of living abroad, Mrs. Scudder returned to our town and opened the imposing old Scudder house on Settlers' Hill, everyone wondered what the dinners at Mrs. Scudder's would be like and if one could live up to the cosmopolitan brilliance of her conversation.

Nobody found out, for the simple reason that Mrs. Scudder had no dinner parties. In an interview she gave to the *Gazette,* she announced that she had come home to taste the blessings of peace and quiet. People who met her said

she was cold and austere. A few, who tried to intrude upon her solitude on the pretext of getting her support for this or that good work, called her stingy. The only time I saw her was at the meat counter of our general store, where she was buying a pound of chopped beef for her dachshund. She seemed friendly enough with the butcher and she looked exactly what she was – an elderly New England woman who had learned in her travels how to wear simple, good clothes and carry a lorgnette without looking a fool.

I don't know how willingly she became chairman of the Committee for Refugee Children, but she accepted. At that time it was believed that our town would give shelter to many youngsters sent here from England. Mrs. Scudder put herself down for two, and many families, following her example, agreed to take in others. There was much planning and preparation for the care of the expected young visitors. Somebody even suggested that a course in French be given, on the chance that some of the little refugees might be French or Belgian

children. And then the bubble of preparation was pricked when England decided that it was unsafe to send the children across the ocean.

By the time Sophie became a member of this group, its purpose had been changed. With admirable flexibility, it had insured its survival by voting to become a committee for sending clothes, food and medical supplies to refugees in England. Sophie approved of this effort, as she approved of anything any of the committees did.

One never-failing, good old American method of raising funds for good causes is selling tickets to a public supper, held either at a church or at a private home. I have been to several such suppers, and the menu is invariably the same: cold meats, potato salad, baked beans, pie, and coffee. When Sophie told me the Refugee Committee was planning such an event, I asked her where.

"We don't know yet," she answered. "The ladies would like to have it at Mrs. Scudder's house, but she ain't said she would do it."

"It's a big house," I said.

"Sure," Sophie agreed, grinning at me, "and they all crazy to see it. This give them fine excuse."

"Do you want to see it?" I inquired.

Sophie shrugged her shoulders.

"All I care about is the kitchen," she answered. "I like plenty room to make coffee and plenty hot water to wash dishes. Ham and beans taste the same in every house. No?"

It was at the Refugee Committee meeting following this talk that the doctor's wife, by prearrangement, asked Mrs. Scudder if she would take the initiative in the season's program by having the first supper in her house. It was obvious from Mrs. Scudder's reaction that she didn't like the notion at all. For several moments, as it was reported to me, she said nothing, but sat at the head of the table around which the women were sewing and twirled the black ribbon of her lorgnette around her forefinger.

"It's not that I don't want to open my house," she said finally, "but I thoroughly dislike ham and potato salad and pie."

Before anybody could sufficiently recover to

make a courteous reply to this flagrant criticism of a sacred American institution, Sophie's voice cut the heavy atmosphere.

"Me too, Mrs. Scudder!" she called from her place at the ironing board, where she was pressing little garments that were to be sent to England. "Also baked beans. They give me bad pain in the stomach."

This was the first time, in all probability, that Mrs. Scudder had been aware of Sophie as a person. A few women laughed in nervous embarrassment, but Mrs. Scudder did not.

"I quite agree with you, Mrs.—"

"Halenczik," Sophie said. "Sophie Halenczik."

"Halenczik," Mrs. Scudder repeated. "You're Czech, aren't you? I remember thinking that when I saw your picture in the *Gazette* last spring." She looked gravely at Sophie for a long time, then smiled. "Tell me, Mrs. Halenczik," she went on, "what kind of supper would you prepare if you had it at your house?"

Sophie, I was told, looked almost frightened for a moment, as if she had been trapped into making an assertion that would destroy her

standing as an American. But, relying on Mrs. Scudder's leadership and Frankie's patriotic service, both unimpeachable, she answered bravely, "Frankie, he want goulash and noodles and apple strudel filled with nuts before he go to camp."

"Goulash and noodles and apple strudel," Mrs. Scudder repeated softly, and those who sat near enough to hear her said it was like a sigh burdened with unforgettable memories of happiness.

"Or maybe I make paprika chicken for main dish and *marillenknödel* for dessert," Sophie continued, with increasing courage. "My husband, he was crazy about that."

Before anyone knew quite how it happened, Sophie was seated next to Mrs. Scudder and the two of them were excitedly talking food. The rest of the group sat entranced as they listened to the discussion of the respective virtues of *kolatchen* and *stollen, sauerbraten* and stuffed goose neck, and chopped beef in cabbage leaves and chopped veal in grape leaves plucked in the heat of summer.

"And *piroshki.* Can you make *piroshki?*" Mrs. Scudder asked in a voice almost breathless with unbelief. "Or are they too Russian?"

"Sure, I make *piroshki,*" Sophie declared proudly. "I make them stuffed with chopped chicken livers mixed with farina. And I make them filled with sour cherries for dessert. And sugar and sour cream over them. No?"

A groan of delight escaped the austere lips of Mrs. Thornton Scudder. She gazed at Sophie with worshipful eyes and then shook her head, as if in rejection of a thought that was passing through her mind.

"No. It would be impossible," she said, half to herself, and then, feeling she owed it to Sophie to explain her remark, she continued, almost wistfully, "I was thinking it would be wonderful to give a supper at my house of paprika chicken and strudel or — "

"Goulash, and *kugelhopf* for dessert," Sophie suggested joyously. "Or maybe *sauerbraten* and cabbage strudel. You know cabbage strudel. And maybe *torte* for dessert. No?"

"We could sell a hundred tickets at a dollar

apiece easily," the treasurer of the committee broke in, shrewdly raising the price that had been planned.

Mrs. Scudder looked at Sophie as though she were some precious discovery in a world of drab monotony and shook her head in regret.

"No. It's impossible. It's absolutely impossible. One person couldn't do it alone. Even if I helped, she couldn't do it. Not for a hundred people."

Then Sophie casually introduced the news which rocked our town for days.

"I do it if you want, Mrs. Scudder. I get Kathi to help me."

"Kathi? Who's Kathi?" Mrs. Scudder asked.

"Kathi is my cousin," Sophie explained. "She live with me. She and the two children, until her husband get fixed in Brockton, Massachusetts. They come from Europe four months ago."

"From Europe? Four months ago?" Mrs. Scudder asked, and the women around the table were held by the intonation of her voice.

"Sure. They greenhorns," Sophie explained.

"Paul – he is Kathi's husband – he have to hide when the Nazis find out about him. Paul hate them. He belong to the Masaryk Party."

"How did they get here?" Mrs. Scudder asked, her eyes wide with amazement.

"We help them," Sophie answered. "A man, a friend of Paul, he come from New York one day with a letter from Paul and he tell us he can get them out if we have money for the tickets for the ship. That was a long time ago, more than a year. He don't say where they are; he say it's a secret. But we ask him a lot of questions about Paul and Kathi and we know he tell the truth."

"Well?" Mrs. Scudder said gently.

"Well, we collect the money. We all got a little something in the bank – Mary and Irene and Annie. No? And then we get a mortgage on the house for the rest." The intense faces around the table confused her for a moment. "That is all right," she explained, smiling at her listeners assuringly. "They pay back someday. We come to America like that, too. My husband's brother – he work in a bakery – he

help us. We pay back every penny. That's all right."

"You brought over four refugees and are now taking care of them in your house?" Mrs. Scudder said in a voice trembling with emotion. "It's incredible!"

Sophie shook her head in perplexed denial of Mrs. Scudder's words.

"They relatives. Not refugees. They don't come from England. They cousins, greenhorns, just like we was when we come here. Paul is a good man. Only he hate the Germans, so they want to send him to prison. But he run away and they come here. He hope they can stay here. That's all."

Mrs. Scudder rose unsteadily to her feet and looked down the length of the table. I am told her eyes were brimming with tears as she addressed the women of the committee. When she sat down, Sophie was covered with the bewilderment of hearing herself described as a heroine. She, Sophie Halenczik, whose sacrifice had brought four humans out of the inferno of a Nazi-conquered land and whose humble

home gave shelter to three of them, was proclaimed the town's noblest citizen.

The news about Sophie traveled quickly. There was a long story in the *Gazette,* with a picture showing Sophie and her three refugees; there was a supper of goulash and noodles and apple strudel at Mrs. Scudder's house, prepared by Sophie, her Cousin Kathi, and several of our town's hostesses, who were happy to serve under Sophie's leadership; there was the announcement that the committee had pledged itself to pay off the mortgage on Sophie's house through a series of suppers; and there was the picture in the *Gazette* showing Mrs. Scudder handing Sophie a check for the proceeds of the first of these suppers. Sophie still doesn't know what to make of it, but she is naturally highly elated over her importance.

"I don't understand," she said to me when she came to do her cleaning the day after the Scudder supper. "I always think refugees are the people in England what need clothes and medicine. No?" Her smile was perplexed. "Anyway,"

she added, "we got some nice pictures in the paper. I send them to Frankie and I tell him we got three refugees at home, not three greenhorns. That make him feel fine."

3

Sophie's War Romance

TO SOPHIE HALENCZIK THE WAR IS A TREMENDOUS adventure. This is said not in condemnation of her but in enormous respect for her enthusiasm and energy. Before we entered the conflict, Sophie's time was given generously to committees engaged in war relief; now she gives it to activities concerned with defense. She was

one of the earliest to enroll for Red Cross first-aid training. She weighs only a little over a hundred pounds, and where she gets the strength to do the things she accomplishes is a source of wonder to all who know her. Her real life, apparently, begins around four o'clock in the afternoon when she is through with her work at the various houses she cleans. Somehow it is all tied up with her idea of New World freedom. Once, when I spoke skeptically of what seemed to me too feverish an activity among some of the women in our town, Sophie chided me.

"Is good," she said. "Is American. In the old country, when war comes women are scared. The men go away and the women stay home. They do nothing. They just wait for bad things to happen. No?" Sophie was speaking of the last war, when she was still in that part of the world which later became Czecho-Slovakia. "Is wonderful here," she continued. "They not scared. They make committees. They learn how to take care of people hit by bombs. They get pictures in the *Gazette*."

Sophie loves the *Gazette*, our New England

town's weekly newspaper. Three times has she had her picture in it, the first time when Frankie went off to Camp Devens, later with her Czech refugee cousins and, last, with Mrs. Thornton Scudder. She loves it for the personal items about the people she knows, and now, most of all, she loves it for the announcements of war romances. Every item in the paper about one of the town's boys marrying his best girl before he leaves for the Army sends Sophie into a state of vicarious bliss. One can't accuse the American movies of being responsible for her dewiness about love. It is rooted in something much older and deeper, in the gay waltzes of Strauss, in the memories of handsome officers riding down cobbled streets, in remembrances, no doubt colored by time, of her own wooing by the late Stefan Halenczik.

While Sophie has an excellent imagination, I am certain that never in her most extravagant moments did she dream she might be the principal in a war romance. It was probably her picture in the paper that started things, but it was the course in first aid which brought her and

Ernest Hopkins together. The first I knew of it was when Sophie suggested one Friday morning that we really ought to do something about building an extra cupboard in the kitchen. We had often talked about it, but somehow the idea had never been pushed to the point of action. Since material and labor were scarce, I didn't see that this was exactly the time for it, but Sophie argued me out of my objection. She knew, she told me, a very fine carpenter, who could do it for us "good and cheap."

"I call him up now and tell him to come and see. No?"

Thus it was that I was introduced to Ernest Hopkins. He arrived in his car in the afternoon. I must have seen him many times in town, but he was so typical a New Englander that he had made no impression on me. He was lean and stooped, blue-eyed and sharp-jawed, and he chewed tobacco while he talked to me. Several times he went to the door and spat neatly across the wide doorstep. He gave careful attention to our problem, which Sophie presented to him in all its complexities of pots and pans, and

reckoned he could do it for a figure that wouldn't break me. When I asked him when he could do the job, it was Sophie who suggested, "You come next Friday. No?"

"Sure," he agreed, rubbing his lean, gray jowls. "Next Friday's O.K." He grinned amiably at me. "If Mrs. Halenczik is nearly done," he added, "I could give her a lift in my buggy. I'm goin' that way."

Again Sophie took the initiative. "It take me about twenty minutes to finish the floor," she said. "You wait in the car for me. No?"

"Sure," he said, raising his hand in a sort of half-humorous salute to her.

Sophie went to the window and watched him as he settled his long legs behind the wheel. "Mr. Hopkins got a nice car," she said to me. "No? He buy it just before the war. He pretty smart feller."

"Are you falling for a car, Sophie?" I said teasingly. Instead of laughing at me, as I expected, she grew very serious.

"You think he good and old. No?"

"Oh, I don't know," I answered, somewhat embarrassed. "He looks about sixty, I'd say."

"Yah." She nodded. "That pretty old." She pulled herself together. "Anyway," she went on, "it save you a trip to take me home. I figure that out when I tell him to come after three. And next Friday morning, he bring me. I fix that, too."

Ernest Hopkins made a beautiful cupboard for me and at a cost which I am sure was intended as a bribe for my good will in his campaign. For it was clear to me, as I observed his attentions to Sophie, that he was courting her. It was also clear to me that Sophie knew it and wanted me to know it. He timed the finish of his job that day so that he could again take her home.

A woman courted, no matter what her age, is a woman rejuvenated, and Sophie was no exception. There was a look in her dark eyes which made me think that she must have been a very pretty girl when she married her Stefan

more than thirty years before. She was less talkative than usual, but when she spoke it was about Ernest. He was no longer Mr. Hopkins. There were reports of Ernest taking her to the movies and Ernest taking her to a Grange supper.

"Last Sunday, Ernest show me his house," she told me one Friday. "It pretty fine. Six rooms, two floors, bathroom, oil furnace. Is wonderful. No?"

"It sounds to me like a swell setup," I said.

"Yes," she agreed. "He pretty lonely," she went on after a moment. "He got two married daughters. They live in California. For six years now he live alone since his wife die." Sophie ran her dustcloth expertly across the table and examined the clean trace it left.

"You know, Ernest do whole lot of war work," she said, and her voice had a lilt of pride in it. "Not only first aid. Every Wednesday he sit in the air station from eight to ten at night and watch for airplanes. He got good ears and good eyes, that Ernest. And every Monday he go to the firehouse and take lessons how to put out

fires with sand and pumps. It pretty nice for a man so old like him. No?"

"He's not so old, Sophie," I said, giving her the assurance I knew she wanted.

"That what he say," she answered, smiling. "You know what else he say?" she continued, her lips trembling in happy confusion. "He say this is a war romance." A wave of red started from her neck and flowed over her cheeks as she spoke.

"Is it all decided then? Are you going to marry Ernest?"

She shook her head, and her eyes were clouded with perplexity.

"No, not decided. We just talk." Again she made a lane of brightness on the dusty table. "I invite him to my house next Sunday for dinner. I want the family should see him."

With Frankie in the Army and the "greenhorns" departed for Brockton, Sophie's family now consists only of Mary and her daughter, Dolores, Irene and her husband and baby, and Annie, the youngest.

"They'll like Ernest, I'm sure," I said.

Sophie's answer was a noncommittal shrug of the shoulders.

Naturally, I was highly curious about the results of the Sunday dinner, but I had to wait until the following Friday to learn what happened. There are times when Sophie's talkativeness drives me frantic, and there are times when her silence does the same. The Friday after that Sunday dinner, she went about her work as though she were a Trappist monk. It was not until we had sat down to lunch that I succeeded in breaking through to her.

"What happened on Sunday, Sophie?" I asked, foregoing any subtle tactics of approach.

"Nothing," she answered laconically. "He come."

"Doesn't the family like him?"

"Oh, sure," she declared without enthusiasm. "They like him all right." Without interest, she took up a piece of toast, buttered it, and put it down again. "I told you he pretty old." She looked at me and smiled ruefully. "You know,

I think maybe he sick, too. He eat like sick man."

"You're not eating much yourself right now," I said.

"I lose my appetite on Sunday," she replied, sighing. She put a morsel of toast into her mouth and chewed it noisily. "He got false teeth, too," she said, her own teeth champing powerfully. "We make a kind of party on Sunday. You know how it is. A man come to your house to meet the family, you like to show him you live good. We start with little salt herrings in olive oil, then we have some nice chicken soup with egg dumplings. Then we have paprika chicken and noodles. Also, boiled potatoes with chicken fat and fried onions. My husband he used to be crazy for that. And for dessert we have *swetchkenknödel* – kind of sweet dumplings filled with prunes. Not everybody can make them, even in the old country."

"Didn't Ernest like them?" I asked.

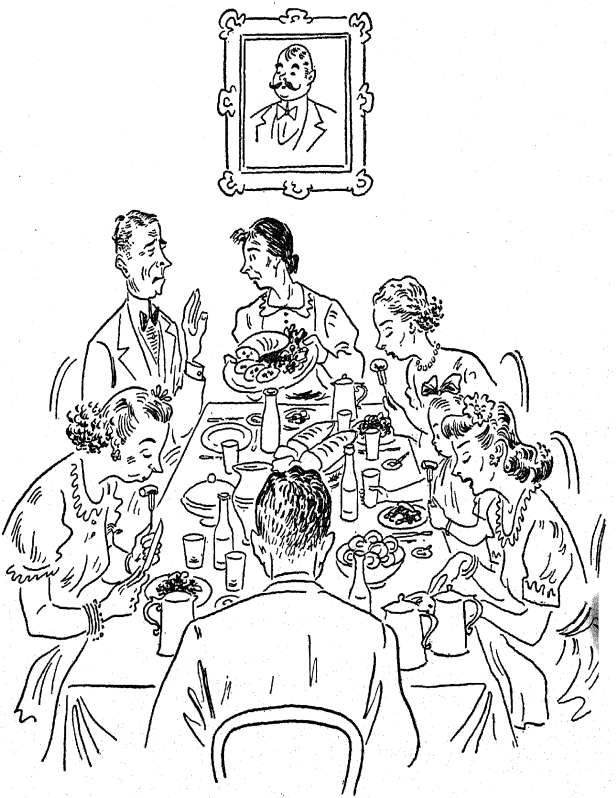
"Didn't he like them?" she repeated bitterly. "He don't touch them. He don't touch the herring. He drink the soup but he don't eat

the dumplings. He ask for a white piece of meat from the chicken, without gravy, no noodles, and he kind of wipe the chicken fat and onions off the potatoes. And when Irene's husband fill the glasses with wine, he ask for a cup of tea, not too strong." Sophie's eyes were filled with tears of outrage. "What kind of man you call that?" she asked.

"I guess he's not used to good cooking," I suggested. "Give him a chance, Sophie. He'll learn."

"Nah," she answered, and the word held complete rejection and disgust. "He never learn. He a sick old man. He say he got a delicate stomach. I don't like that. If a man got no stomach, he got no heart." Her eyes grew soft with memories. "When I think how my dead husband eat! It was a pleasure to cook for him. All the time Ernest eat nothing I think of my husband."

"But, Sophie," I argued, "that was many years ago. Maybe now, if your husband were alive he couldn't eat so well either."



Sophie snorted with unbelief and scorn. "Stefan Halenczik," she declared, "he eat good even if he was ninety years old. Not one tooth he break in all his life. He do everything good. He don't die of sickness. He die because he fall out of a wagon when he is drunk."

"Well, you can't have everything," I said a little weakly. "Ernest may not be a good eater but he's a good provider. You'll be well taken care of in your old age. Doesn't that mean anything?"

"Yes," Sophie agreed, "sure." She tapped her forehead with her forefinger. "Up here," she went on, "it say yes, but here – " she tapped her heart – "it say no, no, no."

I don't know why I pleaded Ernest's cause – it didn't matter one way or the other to me whether Sophie married him – but somehow the situation called for further talk.

"How old are you, Sophie?" I asked. "That is, if you don't mind telling me."

"Going on fifty," she answered. "That not so old."

"No," I agreed, "but at your age love shouldn't be so important. There are other things."

"I know what you are going to say," she interrupted impatiently. "The children tell me that, too. He gonna be company for me when they all leave me someday. He give me – what they call it? – security. I think, if you excuse me, that what my Frankie call a whole lot of boloney. At my age love is more important, maybe, than when people are young. Sure. What else you got? When you young you marry a man and maybe you don't love him. But you both young and you learn to love him. You have children, you cook for him, you got things to talk about. But when you old and you have a sick old husband what can't even eat, what kind of life you got? Maybe we don't even go to movies after we get married. Maybe he ain't strong enough for that." She brushed the crumbs off her fingers as though they were Ernest. "No thank you," she said. "I don't marry for that kind of a life."

"It's your affair, Sophie," I said lamely. "I

just thought this would be another war romance."

Her lips parted in a wistful smile. "No," she said, shaking her head. "Not for me. I guess maybe I am crazy for a while." A look of sly humor came into her eyes and she giggled. "You know what? I think maybe it only a war romance when the man go away to war. If Ernest marry me and go away to fight, would be fine. No?" She laughed. "No. He too old to eat, too old to fight, too old to marry." She grew sober. "Anyway, I don't like the name — Sophie Hopkins. No. That not me. Sophie Halenczik more better. No?"

"Hopkins is a good old American name," I said.

"Sure," she agreed. "But now Frankie is in the Army, Halenczik is good American name too. No?"

"You bet," I said. "All the same, I feel kind of sorry for Ernest. I hope you weren't too hard on him."

Sophie rose from the table and indicated to me that lunch was over. But as she made her

way to the kitchen sink with the dishes, she threw a last remark to me over her shoulder. "Not too hard. He promise to take me to Fort Devens to see Frankie next week. In this country, Ernest say, a man and lady can keep company even if they don't get married. They just good friends. No?"

4

Sophie Finds a Way

DURING THE SEVERAL MONTHS I SPENT IN WASHington on some temporary government work, Fridays in the war-crowded capital seemed particularly desolate, because I realized that if I had been at home in Connecticut, Sophie would be coming to clean our house and talk to me.

I sent her several picture postcards, among them one of the Lincoln Memorial and one of

the Washington Monument. "I like the Lincoln picture," she said in a letter dictated to her granddaughter Dolores. "It look like him. The Washington picture I do not understand. Where is the face?"

To give her the "face" of the Father of His Country, I sent Sophie a postcard reproduction of a painting showing the marriage of George Washington to Martha Custis. She liked that. "They look like a nice, old-fashion couple," she dictated. "That Martha, she look like she make a good wife for him."

There was a great deal in town news and town gossip I had to catch up with when I returned, but though Sophie answered my questions, it was not with her usual loquacity. Something was wrong. Knowing Sophie, I realized that I would have to work around to it. Sophie never blurts out an important fact or bit of news; she leads up to it with affected casualness and sometimes, at the very climax of her narrative, will retreat with deliberate strategy. I asked about Mary; about Dolores; about Irene and Irene's baby; and about Annie. The reports

about all were prosaically good. Frankie I saved for the last, for he is his mother's darling, especially now that he is a soldier and has given Sophie the precious status of an American war mother.

"And Frankie?" I asked finally. "What do you hear of him?"

Sophie's eyes, as she raised them to me, were dark with unhappy confusion. "Oh, that Frankie!" she said, and I knew, then, the core of the trouble.

"Is he still at Camp Lee?" I asked, for she had written me of his transfer from Fort Devens.

She shook her head. "No. Frankie is now in Australia. For three months already."

"But that's war, Sophie," I said lamely. "You're one of many American mothers who —"

She did not let me finish. "Sure," she said. "I know he have to fight. That make me sad, but it make me proud, too." Tears gathered in her eyes.

"What is it then, Sophie?"

"Maybe you call it a war romance. But it is

not a war romance like you can put in the *Gazette,* with a picture."

Sophie is an ardent subscriber of the *Gazette.* To her, it is the *New York Times,* the social register, the Bible, and *True Story* rolled into one. Best of all she loves the little items about local boys who have married local girls before going off to war.

"You mean he's married someone who doesn't live here?" I asked, shooting wildly.

She shook her head. "No. Not like that. He marry nobody. But soon, next month, there is a baby."

"Oh," I said, "it's like that."

I realized the situation wasn't pleasant for Sophie, but still her obvious anguish seemed out of character. She usually accepts the deviations of human relationships with philosophic calm. When her oldest daughter, Mary, bore a child who could not claim a legal father, Sophie thought it unfortunate, but she wept no needless tears over it.

The tears she was shedding over Frankie's adventure were therefore disconcerting. Frankie, clothed in an Army uniform, represented to her the ideals of democracy, the achievement of equality of the foreign-born with those who had been fortunate enough to be fathered in this country. I was searching for words that would bring comfort to her when she said, "She say it is Frankie's baby. How do I know?"

"How about some coffee, Sophie?" I suggested, feeling this was something that needed more careful examination and discussion than could be carried on between dustings and polishings. When we were both seated at the kitchen table with our cups of coffee, I asked who the girl was.

"He meet her when he is at camp," Sophie answered. "We learn about it just before he go to Australia. She come on a Sunday, all the way from Virginia. We all home – all the girls, I mean. She knock, she ask for me, Mrs. Halenczik, and when she see me and the house inside, she laugh. You know, kind of wild, not happy. And then she say, first thing, 'So he was

telling the truth, the bastard.'" Sophie's eyes sought mine in dumb apology for her language. "That what she say. Is not a nice way to begin. No?"

"No," I agreed. "What did she mean?"

"She mean Frankie," Sophie answered simply, and the way she said it indicated that she was in total agreement with the girl. "Her name is Margie – Margie Nelson. She used to work in a coffee pot near the camp. She look very nice, red hair and blue eyes. Frankie is crazy about red hair."

"Lots of men are," I said.

"Yeah," Sophie nodded. "That is the trouble. Frankie want to make a hit with her to take her away from the other soldiers what come to the coffee pot, so he tell her he is rich. He tell her his mother have a big house and a big farm in the country, with cows and chickens and horses. Me!" Sophie took a mouthful of coffee and looked unhappily at me over the rim of her cup. "Big house and farm! We have three acres and forty chickens," she informed me, with bitter emphasis.


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"But Sophie," I said, "what did she mean when she said he was telling the truth?"

Something like a groan escaped Sophie's lips. "That was before," she explained. "First he tell her he is rich and then, when he find out she is in trouble, he tell her I go out working, cleaning houses. He tell her all about the family and the house and the three acres and the forty chickens. And she don't believe him. She think he is trying to get out of it."

"You mean she – well – fell in love with Frankie because she thought he was rich?"

Sophie clasped her hands together on the table before her and I could see the knuckles grow white as she tensed them. "I don't know what she think. She is pretty mad. She say all her life she want to live in the country. And when Frankie tell her all those things about cows and horses and chickens, it is wonderful to her. But Frankie is a fool. Because you know what she say? She say even if he tell her the truth, it would still be wonderful. Because always she live in big cities and work in factories and lunchrooms and she hate them. And she

don't say it, but she love that no-good. That I can see."

"Well, if that's how she feels," I said, "why didn't she marry Frankie before he went to Australia?"

"Why? Why?" Sophie repeated after me, and it sounded as though that question had kept her awake for nights. "You don't know that Frankie. If he want a thing, he is crazy before he have it, and when he have it – phut! It is nothing to him."

"Well, that happens with many of us," I said.

"Sure," she agreed. "But you don't know everything. You know what he say when we write him and tell him he should marry Margie? He say how the hell he know that baby belong to him. He ain't the only soldier what go to the coffee pot. That what he say. He say all she want is some money, maybe five hundred dollars."

Nice lad, I thought to myself, to wish this thing on his mother. Five hundred dollars was a great deal of money to Sophie, but in a pinch, I knew, she and her three daughters could raise

it. They had raised more than that to bring over their refugee cousins from Europe.

"Have you talked to the girl about it?" I asked.

Sophie nodded miserably. "That is why I think Frankie don't know what he talk. That girl get mad like – like anything when I talk about money. She say terrible things about Frankie. She say she came to me only because she think is fine for that baby to grow up in the country and get plenty milk and eggs. She say now she wouldn't marry Frankie for a hundred cows and a million chickens. That what she say."

"Well, what is it she wants, then?"

"Nothing," said Sophie dully. "Now she want nothing. That is why I think she tell the truth about the baby. We tell her we keep her until she go to the hospital for the baby, and she say no. She say she take no charity from strangers. If Frankie say the baby ain't his, then we are strangers. You know what she go ahead and do? She go to Bridgeport and get a job. Even like she is, she get a job. Housework. She tell the lady her husband is a soldier."

"Margie sounds all right to me," I said.

Sophie nodded her head vigorously. "That what I say. That is why I must do something. Maybe it is Frankie's baby and she go away with it and we never see her no more." Her eyes filled with tears. "And if something happen to Frankie, God forbid, we have nothing."

Sophie stacked the coffee cups and indicated that she had better get back to her housecleaning.

The baby, Sophie had said, was due within a month, and as the days went by, I could see her getting more and more tense with anxiety. Whenever I asked her about Margie, she had nothing to report except the fear that the girl would disappear with the baby after she was well again. Acting on impulse, I asked Sophie, a fortnight after she had first spoken about Margie, if she'd like to drive over to Bridgeport with me and see Margie while I attended to some errands there. She jumped at the idea. When we arrived at the apartment house where Margie worked, I told Sophie I'd pick her up in

an hour at the same place. Sophie was waiting for me when I returned. She got into the car without a word, her face set. Not until we were nearing our town did she say anything.

"That Margie," she said, and there was something besides defeat in her voice, something like admiration, "she is stubborn like a mule. Like Frankie. I feel sorry for that baby, with a mother and a father like that."

"How is she being stubborn?" I asked, making no comment on the fact that Sophie had accepted Frankie's paternity.

"I tell her she better come and stay with us after the baby is born, and she say no. She got other plans, she say. Next week she go to the hospital. She fix everything herself. She even got a name for the father of the baby to go on the birth certificate. John Doe, she tell me. She say it is a good American name. I asked her if she don't like the name Halenczik, and she say she hate it." Sophie touched my arm. "I don't think she mean that. She like it good enough when she think she will marry Frankie. No?" Something like a chuckle escaped her. "Anyway,

I make her promise to send me a telegram when the baby comes. First she say no, but I think all the time she want to say yes. I think she is scared. She got nobody — no mother, no father, nothing. She is only nineteen." Sophie sighed. "That Frankie. He got no more brains than a rabbit."

When she left me, Sophie promised to let me know if anything happened. Almost an entire week passed and then, on Thursday evening, she called me.

"Is a beautiful boy," she told me, her voice warm with happiness. "Seven pounds, with black hair and blue eyes. Just like his grandfather."

"Like who?" I asked.

She laughed. "I tell you tomorrow," she said, and hung up.

Sophie's face was peaceful when she arrived the next morning. With maddening perversity, she changed into her work clothes and pretended to start cleaning.

"Come on, Sophie," I said. "No work until you tell me what's happened."

"We wait until lunch," she replied. "No?"

"No," I answered.

She grinned impishly at me. "All right, I tell you. But we have some coffee. No?"

"Yes," I said, not wanting any, but completely in her power.

At last we were seated at the table, and Sophie made a great business of stirring the sugar in her cup. "It's a beautiful baby, with black hair and blue eyes," I prompted. "He looks like his grandfather."

Sophie beamed at me. "I tell you," she said again, and fortified herself with a long swallow of coffee. "You know what is his name? His name is Stephen Halenczik. He is named after my husband. Stefan, we call it in the old country."

"Please, Sophie," I begged. "Start at the beginning."

"The beginning . . ." she murmured as if to say who knows the beginning of anything. And then, deciding she had done enough hedging, she plunged into her recital.

"We get a telegram Wednesday night that Margie have her baby. Thursday morning I

pick some flowers and I take the bus to Bridgeport. I go to the hospital and a nurse take me to Margie's bed. She is sleeping and I stand there. In the next bed is a woman with a skinny face and mean eyes. 'You a friend of the girl?' she say to me. I don't know what get into me. I just don't like her. So I say, 'I am Margie's mother-in-law.' Just like that."

"Nice work, Sophie," I said.

"When I say this, I look at Margie and I see tears come out of her eyes. They are closed, but she is not sleeping like I think. I take her hand and I say, 'Hello, Margie.' She open her eyes, and you know what that girl do? She shake her head and she say just with her lips, 'No!' So I sit down near her bed with my back to the woman what wants to know so much and I ask things. You know – how she feel, if she got a pain, how the baby look. And then they bring him to Margie to be nursed. He is wonderful. He grab like he is starved. He makes me think of Frankie when he is a baby. I know I must have him. But *must!*"

She took another swallow of coffee and wiped

her lips with her apron. "I think and I think and I pray," she continued, "and then Margie, she say to me, 'He is perfect. Just perfect. All except for a birthmark on his back.' 'What birthmark?' I ask, and she lift his little shirt and she show me. I think maybe she was frightened by a mouse when she carry him. Anyway, there is a birthmark where nobody is going to see. He gonna sit on it. I laugh and Margie get mad. 'Is nothing,' she say. 'Lots of people have birthmarks.' 'Sure,' I say. 'They go in the family. Is just like his grandfather, Stefan. He have the same thing just where the baby have it.' "

A murmur of disbelief must have escaped my lips, for Sophie's hand reached out toward me to shut off any comment I might make.

"Is all settled," she said. "We name the baby after my husband, and Margie, she come home to us from the hospital." Refusing to meet my eyes, Sophie went on to tell in great detail the plans for the christening, for buying a crib, for Margie's getting a job in our town just as soon as she was strong enough to work.

"Sophie," I said when she was finished and she answered quietly, "Yes?"

"Sophie, this is between you and me, but you made that up about your husband's birthmark, didn't you? Before, you said she must have been frightened by a mouse when she carried the baby."

A look of panic passed over Sophie's face. "I must never say that again," she declared. "Is good you tell me. Thanks." She reached out across the table and touched my hand. "You don't tell nobody. No?"

"No," I answered solemnly. "But it was pretty bright of you."

She shook her head. "No, not bright. I want that baby. And that birthmark help me. The children – Mary, Irene, and Annie – believe me when I tell them their father have the same thing. They don't know. They never see him naked. They think it is wonderful. And Stefan will forgive me. You know," she added with a smile of tender reminiscence, "that Stefan, he have skin like pure milk. Nothing on it." She came back to the present. "I like that Margie.

She is a good girl. I don't care what happen before she meet Frankie. My heart tell me the baby is his. I don't care if my head say maybe no. That is something only God know for sure. But if He show me how to keep that baby, it is a good sign. No?"

"But what about Frankie?" I asked, being no authority on signs. "How will he like it?"

She shrugged her shoulders. "We see," she said. "We write him about the birthmark. We send him pictures of the baby. We tell him how wonderful is Margie. I think, far away from home, that will make him happy. No?"

5

Sophie Remembers

SOME PERSONS ARE MADE FOR DRAMA AND SOPHIE Halenczik is one of them. It is not so much that they take active roles in creating a situation but that situations pile up around them and then they apply the spark that sets the whole thing off. Certainly, when Sophie told me while she was polishing the silver that she had a boarder at her house, there was nothing dramatic in either the fact or the statement. Our town is essentially a residential one but it is situated in

the midst of a war-production area and many families have rented their spare rooms to workers who commute by car or bus to their jobs.

"Is he a war worker?" I asked Sophie.

"You can say he is a war worker," she answered mysteriously. "But not like you think."

"How then?" I pursued, wishing that Sophie would be less devious in her ways. I must have shown some impatience in my manner for she came, what was for her, quickly to the point.

"You remember my Cousin Paul?" she asked, knowing perfectly well that I remembered. Paul Hovak and his family were the Czech refugees Sophie had brought over from Europe. According to Sophie's latest reports, he is now foreman in a shoe factory in Massachusetts.

"Paul," she went on, when she had assured herself I knew whom she was talking about, "he work what you call 'underground' against the Nazis in the old country. They find out about him and he have to hide. Then we find out and we bring them here. No?"

"Yes," I said, mentally reviewing Sophie's part in that heroic story.

"My boarder," she continued with unmistakable pride, "he is one of them. He work underground, too. Last Sunday he come to us. He is a friend of Paul but he must not see him right away. Maybe somebody follow him and make trouble. He ask if he can stay with us until he is safe. He is from the old country, from Prague, and he don't speak English so good. So we say yes. Is better he stay with friends." She smiled shrewdly. "He got plenty money. He pay fifteen dollars a week."

"What sort of underground work is he doing here?" I asked.

"That is a secret, he say. I think it is to help people who are in trouble with the Nazis to come out of Europe."

"It must be pretty crowded at your place," I commented, wondering how they managed in Sophie's small five-room house. There is Sophie, there is Sophie's oldest daughter Mary and Mary's child, Dolores, there is Annie who works in a beauty parlor. Sophie has another daughter, Irene, but she is married and lives in Bridgeport where her husband works in a war factory.

Irene's place is more than filled by the two members Sophie has recently added to the family, Margie Nelson and the baby, Stephen.

"Yes," Sophie agreed, "is pretty full. Annie, she don't like it. She complain all the time about Karl. That is his name, Karl Jarmisch. She don't like how he talk, how he walk, how he eat. All the time she find fault with him. She just got a hate on him. Is not like my Annie. She was good like gold to Paul and Kathi and the children. But Karl she just don't like. She say – how is it? – he get into her hair."

"Well, it's pretty hard to have a stranger around. Especially a man in a houseful of women. He's bound to get in the way."

"Sure," said Sophie. "That is what I tell her. And he know it, too. Most of the time he stay in the woodshed." She smiled complacently at my look of surprise. "Oh, is not so bad. Frankie, he fix it nice before he go to war. He work there with his tools. Frankie is wonderful with tools. He have a bench and a table. Karl, he can work there. He write a lot of letters. Anyway," she finished, "he stay with us a few weeks, maybe,

he say. We buy a crib and a high chair for the baby with the money."

I often thought of Sophie's boarder during the days that followed. I felt sorry for him, a stranger in our midst, carrying on the work of deliverance of fellow nationals caught in the net of Nazi power. And yet, sorry for him as I was, I didn't wholly like it. While I could recognize the nobility and courage of men like him, I hated the idea of a small American community like ours being made a cell in a secret underground movement, however worthy. Well, this is war, I thought, without too much originality, and we are involved in all its ramifications.

When Sophie came to do her house cleaning for us the following Friday, I inquired about her boarder.

"Oh, he is all right," she declared. "Everybody get along with him fine but that Annie. All the time she fight with him. We have a terrible fight Sunday."

"That's too bad," I said. "Was it about anything serious?"

Sophie shrugged her shoulders.

"To Annie it is serious. He tell her girls should talk about pots and pans, not about the war. He get mad when she tell George not to shoot off his mouth."

"George?" I questioned.

"Yes," said Sophie. "George. My son-in-law. Sunday, he and Irene and the baby come for dinner. I cook a fine *sauerbraten* and we have apple strudel for dessert. George, he is crazy for apple strudel. He eat five, six pieces and he feel fine."

"But what started the fight?" I asked Sophie, steering her back to the main track.

"I don't know just how it start. We are eating *sauerbraten* and Karl and George, they are talking about the war. George, he work in a factory in Bridgeport what make guns and other things to shoot. Karl, he know about such things. He work in the Skoda factory in Prague. So is natural they should talk a lot. No?"

"Sure," I said.

"Well," Sophie continued, "George, he ask questions how they make things in the old country and Karl, he ask questions about how

they make things in Bridgeport. I like to see George is so smart with a man like Karl. Then George, he tell how he get a bonus for fixing something on the machine what make it work quicker and Karl, he say it is wonderful and what is it George do? That is when Annie butt in. She tell George he is shooting off his mouth. She say he is making things for the Army and it is a secret. And George say it ain't no harm to talk to a man like Karl who have the guts – that what he say – the guts to fight the Nazis, and Annie she say it is wrong to talk to anybody. Then Karl tell her not to be foolish and she get mad and she ask him how many secrets he tell about his work. And then he get kind of still in the face and he tell her she should go back to the kitchen where she belong. So Annie, she say in America men don't say such things and Karl, he say that maybe she forget that she is born in the old country. And Annie, she say, mad like anything, no, she don't forget. But now, she say, she is an American and she is proud to belong to a country where girls ain't dirt under the feet of men. Then George, that dope, he take

sides with Karl and they don't finish their strudel and they go to the woodshed to talk." Sophie sighed. "So now," she added, "is bad feeling all over. Annie she don't talk to George and she don't talk to Karl. And George, just because he is mad at Annie, he say he don't come for dinner next Sunday. No. And to make her more mad, he invite Karl to come to Bridgeport where he can show him things. That George. All his life he live in Bridgeport and he think it is the most wonderful place in America. You know what he say? He say Bridgeport gonna win the war."

"What about your Cousin Paul?" I asked, trying to get a line on Sophie's boarder. "Has Karl got in touch with him yet?"

"No, not yet," Sophie answered. "He think maybe next week he will go to Brockton where Paul live. Paul will be surprised to see him, he say. Paul does not know yet that Karl is in this country."

"I'm sure you'll be relieved when this stranger is out of the house," I said. "It can't be very pleasant for you having Annie and him quarrel."

"No, is not very nice," she agreed. "I don't like people to be mad with each other. I explain to Annie that in the old country is not like here. Girls don't tell the men to shut up, especially when the men is so old like George and Karl. Karl is maybe forty years old. I tell her I never tell her father to shut up and I know him good. And I explain to Karl when I see him alone that in this country girls is different. They go to work and they don't respect men just for nothing. And Karl say, sure, he understand and later he try to talk nice to Annie but she don't answer him. She is stubborn, that Annie."

Throughout the day, Sophie would come back to discussion of her boarder, now supporting Annie's irritation with him, now defending him.

"Is hard for him," she explained. "He is all alone. He got no family; he got no friend; he got no work. All day he sit in the woodshed. When I go to work, he is there; when I come back from work, he is there. He read the newspapers. He write letters. So when he talk at night he is full of things that make him sad. He is homesick

so he talk how wonderful it is in the old country, how the music is good, how the people work hard and drink beer and have good times. But Annie she don't understand that. She think he mean his country is better than America and that make her mad."

The next time I saw Sophie, she reported that her boarder was going to leave her just as soon as George could find a room for him in Bridgeport.

"Is yet that Annie," she explained. "She make things too hard. All the time she is looking mad and saying things. Ain't worth fifteen dollars a week to have so much trouble in the house. You know what she say last Sunday when Karl he take the bus to Bridgeport to visit George? She say Karl is a Nazi spy. She is crazy. No?"

"That's a pretty serious charge," I said. "He's a friend of your Cousin Paul's. And she knows that the Nazis were going to kill Paul."

"That is what I tell her. So she say, why don't he go to Paul, then? And I say because he must wait until it is safe. So she say this ain't Ger-

many. A man don't have to hide in this country. So you know what she do?"

"No," I answered, anxious to hear what Annie had done and afraid it might be a foolish thing.

"She write to Paul and ask him about Karl Jarmisch and who he is."

"That wasn't a bad idea," I said.

"No," Sophie acquiesced. "That is good. It show she is wrong. Because Paul, he write back all glad and excited. He don't know that Karl is here. He is afraid that maybe the Nazis catch him when he run away from Prague. Karl's father, he write, he is killed by the German soldiers and Karl, he swear over his body that he will never forget. He do all kinds of dangerous things against the Nazis but he don't care. Paul call him a patriot and a hero. He say if Karl say it is not safe to see him yet, it is not safe. He say he trust him like his own hand." Sophie sighed. "Is terrible. No? We have a patriot and a hero for a boarder and Annie don't like him."

"Well, patriots and heroes can be difficult to live with," I offered.

"Sure," said Sophie. "If only he don't talk so much about the old country. That what make Annie so mad. But he ain't no spy. Is terrible for Annie to say that. In the movies a spy have a radio; he have a camera; he have a gun; he light fires by night; he got mean eyes; he don't say much. Karl is not like that at all. I explain that to Annie. She say is all a lot of boloney. In the movies, she say, a patriot and a hero don't look like Karl either. You know what she say? She say she sell her share in the patriot and the hero for a nickel and pay all the money for shipping him. Tch, tch. She ain't got no respect." Sophie shook her head in dismal disapproval of her daughter. "Is better, I think, he go to Bridgeport," she concluded.

Now that Annie had established Karl's identity through Paul, I felt easier. I gave the matter of Sophie's boarder no further thought until a friend telephoned a few days later and told me in great excitement that she had heard at the Town Hall that the FBI had found a German spy in our town. Immediately my thoughts flew to Sophie. I called her up and her voice held a

sort of grim elation as she verified my fears.

"Yes," she said. "It is Karl. That Annie, she is no fool. I tell you Friday."

For once Sophie, who likes to make a game of strategy out of all her stories, did not quibble or hedge when I asked her to tell me what happened.

"After we get that letter from Paul," she said, beginning where she had left off the week before, "I feel very sorry for that – that Karl. So when he want to talk how nice it is in the old country and how people are happy there, I let him. He say the good times will come back and I say, 'Sure.' 'And then,' he say, 'maybe I go home then.' And I say, 'America is home for me now.' He shake his head like he don't like that and I say how wonderful it is for me and the children here. It is like a new life. I tell him look at Dolores. She go to school and if she is smart maybe she go to college someday. In the old country, I tell him, when I am her age I work hard in the fields from morning to night. The only time I don't work is a few hours on Sunday

when we go to mass. And I tell him how once when the Kaiser come to the village where we live I get beaten because I run away from digging in the fields to see him. But I say it is worth it because I always remember how wonderful he look in the carriage with all the soldiers riding on both sides. And then, that Karl, he say the Kaiser was a great man. And he say it is wonderful to see him in a carriage but he look even more wonderful on a horse. Even if he have only one good arm, Karl, he say, he ride like a god. When he say that," Sophie declared with special inflection, watching me for the effect of her words, "I almost die. I know right away Annie is right."

"I don't understand," I said to Sophie, perplexed by her remark. "The Kaiser did have a withered arm."

Sophie's dark eyes gleamed in triumph.

"You also do not know," she declared in ill-concealed triumph. "My Kaiser, he don't have no arm like you say. My Kaiser is Franz Josef. He have two good arms and whiskers."

Now she spoke of it, I remembered, of course.

Bohemia, which after the war became Czecho-Slovakia, had been part of the Austrian Empire, not the German, and Sophie's Kaiser was not the Kaiser of whom Karl spoke with such reverence.

"Great Scott!" I exclaimed, giving her the full tribute of my unqualified excitement and admiration. "What did you say?"

"I say nothing," she answered. "I know this man is no Czech. My heart beat quick but I go on talking. He does not know he has made a mistake. But when we are in bed, I tell Annie. I tell her I am sure he is a German. And if he tell lies about that, maybe he tell lies about other things."

"You must have been scared out of your wits."

"Sure," she answered, "I am so scared, I am afraid to shut my eyes. But that Annie, she have brains, American brains. She is just the same like always next morning. But she fix everything when she leave the house. She telephone to George to come and she send a telegram to Paul that he must come at once. When Paul

get to the house that night, George is already there, talking to Karl about a room in Bridgeport – make-believe talk. And then Paul, he come and he look at Karl and he say, in a whisper-like, 'But, no, this is not Karl Jarmisch.' It is not his friend. And Paul look like he gonna die. We find out later that this man is a Nazi that have killed Karl Jarmisch and have stolen his papers. He come to this country to make trouble. The men from the Government what George call from Bridgeport find things in the woodshed, papers and names." Sophie nodded at me. "Just like a movie. No?"

"Better than a movie," I said. "It must have been pretty exciting at your house that night."

"Oh, yes," Sophie declared. "The man want to kill Paul but George, he is strong like an ox. He is mad like hell because this Karl make a fool of him and try to get secrets about his machine so he hit him plenty. And he laugh at him about his talk about the Kaiser with the bad arm."

"It was wonderful for you to remember about the two Kaisers," I congratulated Sophie. "Very few Americans would have caught that slip."

"That is what that Nazi say. And he is mad like hell that it is a woman with no brains who get him into trouble. You know what I tell him? I say it is the fine, good air of America what make me so smart. But that Annie, she is more smart. She show him American girls know plenty more than pots and pans."

6

Sophie Makes a Speech

"WHEN YOU DO SOMETHING ALL THE TIME, IT ain't something extra. No?"

Sophie Halenczik threw the question at me one Friday morning shortly after she arrived. The answer was obviously "No," and I said so. Sophie nodded her head and proceeded to get into her working clothes, knowing that after

such a remark I'd be sure to draw her out. She watched me out of the corner of her eye while she put the parts of the vacuum cleaner together and plugged it in. She won, as always. It was I who turned off the roar of the machine, which made conversation impossible.

"What's it all about, Sophie?" I asked.

She looked at me as though she hadn't the slightest notion what I was talking about.

"The something all the time which isn't extra," I explained patiently.

"Oh," Sophie answered. "That what you mean. Is about the victory gardens. They been here yet?"

Perhaps I should explain that our town, like all American communities located in semirural areas, had gone in heavily for victory gardens. Throughout the spring and summer there had been an extended campaign to encourage everybody who owned a bit of land to use it for raising food. The *Gazette* had carried articles and editorials about the duty of all citizens "to help feed our soldiers, our allies, and our own families."

To add zest, the program had been worked out on a competitive basis. The town had been divided into eight districts and a prize of a five-dollar war stamp was to be awarded to the woman in each district who canned, preserved, or otherwise stored the most foodstuffs for the winter. In addition, a prize of a twenty-five-dollar war bond was to go to the one who made the best record in all eight districts. These prizes were being donated by local committees engaged in war-service work of one kind or another. Now that the summer was nearly over, the time for checking up had come. Our district committeewoman, very charming in a mauve sweater and beige slacks, had already called on me and, with the card bearing my name on her knee, had asked how many quarts of peas, beans, tomatoes, and berries I'd put up; how many bushels of potatoes and carrots I'd stored for the winter; how many barrels of apples. My garden is a tiny one – all I can manage during the hours when I'm not working. The abnormal amount of rainfall this year, on land which always drains poorly, hadn't helped any. We had

had several messes of beans and peas for the table during the summer, but most of the other stuff I'd planted had died of wet feet.

I explained all of this to my interviewer, but she was not sympathetic. Other people, she said, had been able to rise above the handicaps of work and weather. She herself had canned over two hundred quarts of beans and tomatoes and her cellar was going to hold enough potatoes and apples to last her family all winter.

I offered to store the two bushels of very sour apples which come off our lone tree but felt obliged to explain that a similar effort last year had not met with success. Those put in the garage had frozen, those in the cellar had rotted. If the committee were looking for a candidate for a booby prize, I added in an effort to establish a more cordial relationship with my interviewer, I was willing to stand for election, so to speak. The manner with which the committeewoman tore up my card indicated what she thought of me and my levity. We parted with great politeness, but I had the feeling when

she left that the FBI would be on my tracks for willful interference with the war effort.

Sophie, I knew, would suffer no such ignominy. Her garden is always a miracle of fertility. She tends it with a peasant's feeling for land and, with the help of her daughters and her grandchild, she grows and preserves enough vegetables and fruit to keep the family supplied until the next summer's crop is ready for the table.

When Sophie asked me if my victory garden had been inspected, I told her how badly I had come off with the committeewoman, and then I said, "They must have been pleased with you."

"Sure," she said. "They like it all right. But we have an argument."

"What about?"

"Well, when you do something all the time, it ain't something extra. That woman, she keep on saying what a fine victory garden I make. I tell her it ain't no different from the garden I have last year, but she laugh and say I am modest and how nice that is. She say I have a

good chance to win the prize for my district. Crazy. No?"

"No," I said. "Not if you put up more than anybody else in your district."

Sophie put her finger on the button that started the vacuum cleaner. "I don't like such a prize," she said, and the roar of the motor as she started it told me that a second interview over victory gardens had ended sourly for me. I felt low about this, for I cherish Sophie's good opinion of me. At lunchtime I tried once again to talk about her garden, but, with the dignity that can be hers on occasion, Sophie indicated the subject was closed. However, she did refer to it that day, in connection with Mrs. Thornton Scudder, our town's most distinguished resident. Sophie's admiration for Mrs. Scudder is boundless. The feeling, I should add, is reciprocated by Mrs. Scudder.

"Somebody tell me," Sophie said, "that Mrs. Scudder give the big prize, the twenty-five–dollar war bond. She is a fine lady."

I agreed, pleased that there was something to re-establish our amity.

"She wait until the prizes is finished and then she go to Washington for a week," Sophie went on. "Her brother-in-law just come back from England. He have a big job with the President." Sophie giggled. "All the ladies hope she will take them."

"Take them?" I repeated in surprise. "Why in heaven's name should she?"

"Oh, I guess you don't know," Sophie declared with unconcealed superiority. "You don't belong to the committee. Mrs. Scudder, she ain't so young no more and she don't feel so good. So she say at the meeting last week that maybe she take someone with her to Washington if they like to go." Again Sophie giggled. "If they like to go!" she continued. "They dying to go. Mrs. Brown, the lady where I clean on Wednesdays, she tell me to be in Washington with Mrs. Scudder is like getting a ticket to the greatest show on earth. That is what she say — 'the greatest show on earth.' She wonder if two evening dresses is enough."

"Well, I guess she's right," I said. "Washington is an exciting place right now and Mrs. Scud-

der must know a lot of interesting people down there."

"People is people," said Sophie.

I should have realized how deeply Sophie felt about the victory gardens, but I didn't, and was completely taken off my feet one evening a few days later, when a neighbor who belongs to Mrs. Scudder's committee called me up just after the meeting and told me that Sophie had created a sensation.

"What did she do?" I asked.

"She made a speech on patriotism. It was blistering. The garden contest is off for the time being."

In spite of the lateness of the hour, I went over to my neighbor's house to hear the story. It seems that, after the secretary had gone through the usual rigmarole of reading the minutes, Mrs. Scudder took the floor and announced that the results of the victory-garden contest were in. It gave her great pleasure, she said, to tell them that one of the eight district prizes was going to a member of their own committee

— Sophie Halenczik. In the midst of the applause Sophie's voice rose in refusal.

"No!" she shouted. "Is not right!"

"Why, Sophie," Mrs. Scudder declared, "of course it's right," and then she proceeded to read off the items of Sophie's achievements in canning, preserving, and storing. "Why, it's wonderful what you've done! It's an example of patriotism for all of us."

"Excuse me, Mrs. Scudder," Sophie insisted, "but is not right. Is not, like you say, patriotism. Please. I explain." Again she repeated the statement she had made to me — when you did something all the time, it wasn't something extra. Every year she had put up things from her garden, she declared. "It save money in the wintertime," she said to the committee. "All poor people do that. They don't get no prizes for that before." And then she gripped the table and poured forth the thoughts that had been troubling her for days.

"We fight a war," she said. "My Frankie is a soldier. He is now in Australia. I want we should win the war. I want Frankie should come home.

The radio say we need ships and air-o-planes and things like that. It say we got to do more, we got to send more things to the soldiers. It say we got to make a big record in everything. No?"

Somebody laughed in embarrassment at this point, my neighbor told me, and Sophie stopped, but Mrs. Scudder quietly urged her on.

"You think I talk foolishness," Sophie said, "but this ain't foolishness for me. This prize is bad, is wrong. The *Gazette* will print the names. No? And I send the paper to Frankie. What you think he say when he read about this prize? He say it is a fake. He say, 'Boloney! That ain't no victory garden! My old woman, she always put up all these things.' That what he say. And then maybe he get scared. Sure. Like I get scared. Maybe all the things they say on the radio and in the papers about more ships and air-o-planes is no more true than the garden. Maybe people ain't doing more now than before the war but they say everything is war work. Is bad for people to think they do something wonderful when they don't do nothing. Is all right to give

a prize, but first find the people what do something more this year than what they do other times. No?"

"Whew!" I said. "That was telling them. What happened next?"

"Plenty," my neighbor said. "Sophie cried and tried to go home, but Mrs. Scudder wouldn't let her. There was a whole lot of talking and whispering and then Mrs. Scudder rapped on the table with her lorgnette and called the meeting to order again. She asked if anybody cared to make any comments on Sophie's statement, and nobody knew what to say, so Mrs. Scudder said she would like to make a few remarks. 'I wish there had been a stenographer present,' she said, 'to take down Sophie's words. They ought to be printed as an editorial in the *Gazette.* That's the sort of bedrock patriotism the nation needs. And in any case, it's clear that the victory gardens need rechecking on the basis of comparison with past performances.' And then, to cap the whole thing, right in front of all of us Mrs. Scudder asked Sophie if she'd be her guest on her trip to Washington."

"Marvellous," I said. "And Sophie on the editorial page of the *Gazette* is something to cheer about."

My neighbor shook her head. "No. Mrs. Scudder tried to make her say the thing over again, but Sophie wouldn't. In her own way she made it clear that her remarks were not for the record. She was a little frightened, I think, at what she had said."

When I saw Sophie the following Friday I congratulated her on her courage at the meeting. She made a face.

"I talk too much," she said. "Is just that I get so mad inside when I think of Frankie."

"When do you leave for Washington?" I asked.

"Me?" Sophie replied. "I don't go to Washington. Who take care of my family and all the cleaning jobs? Besides, like I tell Mrs. Scudder, is time now to dig up potatoes."

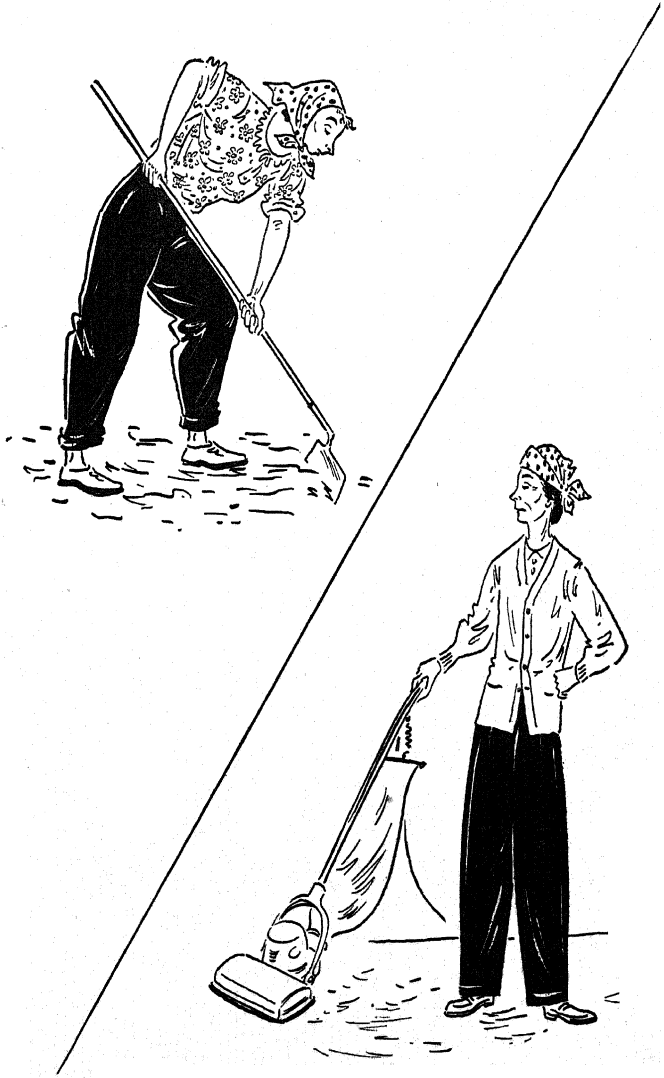
7

Sophie Gets a Pair of Pants

SOPHIE HALENCZIK CAME TO WORK ONE FRIDAY morning recently wearing a pair of very nice smoke-gray–flannel slacks. She must have been a little self-conscious about them for no sooner had she taken off her coat than she asked me with a shy smile, "Well, how you like me in pants?"

I liked her very well in pants. Sophie weighs about a hundred pounds; hard work has kept her trim and lean. Many a woman more fortunately placed than Sophie, I thought, would envy the neat appearance she made. I told her so and added, "How do you like wearing pants?"

"Oh," she said, with a little deprecatory gesture of her hands, "pants is nothing new to me. In the old country I always wear them. Is easier to work in the fields with pants." She grew reminiscent. "My husband, Stefan, he is a very big man. Not fat but big, with big strong shoulders and big and strong in the middle. Like a tree. When I put on his pants, we laugh something terrible. I swim in them. But we have a neighbor, Mary Vozek. She is a big woman but she have a skinny little husband. Is funny, no, how big men like little women and little men they like the big ones? I give her Stefan's old pants and she give me Anton's. It work out good that way. Sometimes when Stefan see me in Anton's pants, he laughs. He say maybe he make a mistake to marry me. He say a woman should be big enough to fill her husband's pants. He say



maybe he should be married to that cow, Mary Vozek. I know is all right when he call her a cow." She sighed, in memory, no doubt, of the departed Stefan and his laughing ways.

"You know," she added, assembling her dust-cloths and brushes, "when I come to this country, I bring with me a pair of Anton's pants. When we buy our place here in the country – that is about a year after we come to America – first thing I do, I put on the pants to dig in the garden. But the children make a big noise. They say all the neighbors know we are greenhorns if they see me in pants. They say is not American for a woman to wear pants."

She chuckled. "Is funny, no? Now all the ladies wear them. Is very stylish. They wear pants and they wear handkerchiefs on their heads. First time I see my Annie with pants and a handkerchief, I almost die. She look just like her grandmother in the old country when she is digging potatoes. Annie don't like it when I tell her that. She don't wear those pants to dig potatoes, she wear them to go on a picnic." Sophie looked down in approbation of her own slacks.

"I don't wear these beautiful pants to dig potatoes. They too good. I wear them to show you. Mrs. Marlowe give them to me last week before she go back to New York."

Mr. and Mrs. Marlowe, a well-to-do middle-aged couple from New York, are summer residents in our town. Sophie cleans their house on Wednesdays.

"They've stayed longer this year than usual, haven't they?" I asked.

"Sure," Sophie agreed. "They have a big argument over it. Mrs. Marlowe, she want to stay here all winter. Mr. Marlowe, he say she is crazy."

"Why should they want to stay here?" I asked. "They have a large apartment in New York, haven't they?"

Sophie gathered up her things. "I tell you when we eat lunch," she declared. "Is a long story." And then, deliberately to whet my curiosity, she threw a question at me: "You gonna be plenty warm this winter?"

I realized that the "argument" between the Marlowes had something to do with keeping

warm this winter but beyond that I was in the dark. Sophie's back as she went into the living room told me I should have to be patient until she was ready to talk. At noon I had lunch ready on the table and the water for the coffee boiling on the stove. Sophie heard me preparing things, I know, but she pretended to be surprised when I told her to quit work.

"Oh, is time to eat already?" she asked but the look in her eye was not as innocent as her question. When we were seated at the table, she spread her sandwich with great care and made much of the business of cooling her coffee.

"Look, Sophie," I said, "I think we'll manage to keep warm this winter. But what has this to do with Mrs. Marlowe?"

"Oh, yes," Sophie murmured. "Mrs. Marlowe. You know her?"

"No," I answered. "Not very well. I've met her but I don't really know her."

Sophie weighed this statement for a while, then nodded her head several times.

"So," she said at last. "So."

"So what?" I asked inelegantly.

"So I tell you," she came back. "Mrs. Marlowe is a very fine lady. No? They have a nice house, plenty money. Her husband have a big job in Wall Street. You know Wall Street?"

"I know Wall Street," I answered.

"She got nothing to worry about, that Mrs. Marlowe. She got a maid and a man for the garden. On Wednesday I just do the extra work." Sophie sipped her coffee noisily and looked at me over the rim of her cup. "You know what she call me?" she asked, lifting her lips from the coffee.

"What can she call you?" I asked a little impatiently. "Either Sophie or Mrs. Halenczik."

Sophie shook her head.

"No, not that way. She call me 'a native.' That is how she introduce me to Mr. Marlowe first time I see him. 'Sophie is a native here,' she say. He look funny when he hear that so when I go home I ask Annie what is a native and Annie say is somebody who live in the country all the time so is all right."

"But what about keeping warm in the winter, Sophie?"

"I come to that," Sophie told me. "I don't forget. Mrs. Marlowe is very busy with the war this summer," she went on. "She look wonderful in her uniform."

"What uniform?"

"Blue," said Sophie. "She belong to the ladies what gonna drive ambulances when the Germans come."

"Oh, the Motor Corps," I said.

"Sure," Sophie agreed. "That is the name." She dunked a piece of bread in her second cup of coffee. "That what start the whole thing."

"I thought it was keeping warm this winter," I declared, getting a little confused.

"Is all mixed up," Sophie replied. "I tell you. I am there one Wednesday cleaning the kitchen when Mr. Marlowe come home from Wall Street – he take the train every day – and he say, 'Hello, Sophie. Getting ready to close the house?' Mrs. Marlowe who is in the kitchen with me then start the argument. She say, just like she was talking about the supper or something, 'Hank, I think we ought to stay up here this winter.' He look like he don't know what

she is talking about, then he say, 'Are you crazy? We always close the house in October.' Mrs. Marlowe look at him hard and she say, 'You forget, Hank, we are in a war now. Nobody do the things what they always do.'

"I don't know what she mean by that," Sophie went on, "and Mr. Marlowe he don't know, too. I like to ask what she is talking about but I think is better I keep quiet. But he don't. He say, 'What the hell that got to do with going back to New York, Daisy? You'll freeze in this barn in the wintertime. Is a summer place.' He is right." Sophie explained. "They have no stove and no furnace. Only fireplaces. Is beautiful to have company before the fireplace but it ain't warm. No?"

"Well, what did she mean?" I asked Sophie. "What did she say to Mr. Marlowe?"

Sophie grinned.

"I don't know what she mean but she say, 'What does it matter if I am not so warm like always? Think of the men and women freezing in Russia.' Mr. Marlowe, his eyes look like he is just waking from sleep and then he go to the

closet and take out a bottle of whisky. 'I need a drink,' he say. He swallow it quick and then he say, 'Now, maybe, I can take it. What about the freezing Russians? What they got to do with you?'

" 'They got nothing to do with me,' Mrs. Marlowe say. 'I only say if they can suffer in this war, so can I.'

" 'Darling,' he say to her and I don't think he really mean darling. He say, 'Darling, you're nuts. The Russians don't suffer because they want to. They suffer because they got to. They like to be warm. They like to live in a house with steam heat like you got in New York. And if you want to suffer, you can keep the apartment at zero when I am not there. That is O.K. with me. But we are not staying here this winter. It don't make no sense.'

"All the time," Sophie continued, "I keep on fixing things in the kitchen. I don't like to listen to a fight between a husband and a wife but I like to hear what they say. What Mrs. Marlowe say next almost make me drop the plate I have in my hands.

" 'Look at Sophie,' she say. 'She have no New York apartment to go to. She give her son to the war and she stay here in her little house all through the cold and the snow. Sophie is a better American than you are, Hank Marlowe.'

"I feel very sorry for Mr. Marlowe when his wife say that," Sophie declared. "He look this way and that way and then he take another drink. He kinda raise the glass to me before he swallow it. I think maybe he need some help in the argument even if I do not like to mix up in it, so I say, 'Sure, we stay here all through the cold and the snow, Mrs. Marlowe, but we do not suffer. We have a good stove in the kitchen and plenty of wood in the woodshed. We keep plenty warm and safe, just like every year.'

" 'Thank you, Sophie,' say Mr. Marlowe. 'You're a good scout.' You know, he talk a whole lot like my Frankie," Sophie commented. "Is good American talk. Anyway, then he say to his wife, 'You hear what Sophie say. She gonna keep warm and safe this winter. So now you don't have to worry about that. You can be

warm and safe in New York and still be a good American.' He smile at me. 'I bet Sophie will be warmer and safer here than we gonna be in New York. She won't have to worry about the fuel shortage or keeping the thermomenter at sixty-five. Will you, Sophie?'

"'I just keep plenty warm,'" I answer. "'I don't have no thermomenter.'

"I don't like him to talk too much to me because maybe Mrs. Marlowe will think I am taking sides. That is bad because I work for her. So I think maybe I change the talk a little and I say, 'Anyway, if the Germans come, nobody will be safe, not in New York and not here. But I think here is safer because we don't have so many people and so many houses to shoot. You don't worry about me, Mrs. Marlowe.'"

Sophie smiled quizzically at me.

"I think I am smart when I say this but I am just a fool. I put my foot in it, like my Frankie used to say. Because Mr. Marlowe he look at me and he look at his wife and then he say to her, and his voice is very kind, 'Tell me, Daisy,

do you want to stay here because you would feel *safer* than in New York? Is that it?' "

Sophie paused dramatically for a comment from me.

"Well, I suppose it is safer here," I obliged.

Sophie chuckled.

"That is what you think. That is what I think. But that is not what Mrs. Marlowe think. She get mad like anything. She tell Mr. Marlowe he should be ashamed to call her a coward. She tell him she want to stay here because it is so dangerous. When the Germans come and the Japs come, she say, the bombs they fall here first. You know, she almost frighten me, she talk so sure. But she don't frighten Mr. Marlowe. He just take another drink and he say, 'Listen, baby, where do you get your dope?' He kinda laugh and that make her awful mad.

" 'Hank Marlowe,' she scream at him, 'don't you laugh at me. Look at your map. Look how near we are to Bridgeport. No more than twenty miles. Don't you know that Bridgeport is the arsenal of America?' I never hear that word

arsenal' before but Annie explain it to me that night," Sophie interpolated. "It mean a place where they make everything to shoot the Germans and Japs. Anyway," she went on, "Mrs. Marlowe get more and more mad and tell him all about the factories that make air-o-planes and guns and bombs. 'And I tell you where I get my dope,' she tell him. 'I get it from Mrs. Edgar Haley, commander of our Motor Corps. Do you know what Mrs. Haley say?' she ask. 'She say that when the enemies come they don't go to New York where there is only movies and night clubs. They come here. All the towns around here will be full of dead and dying people.'

" 'Well, well,' say Mr. Marlowe with a funny smile, 'so you gonna stay here to be one of the dead and dying.'

" 'Don't be a fool,' she answer back. 'I want to be here to help them. Why you think I go to the Red Cross and take lessons? Why you think I join the Motor Corps?' she ask.

" 'I hate to tell you,' Mr. Marlowe say.

"Mrs. Marlowe, she don't give up," Sophie

went on. " 'Who gonna take care of all the people if something happen here?' she ask him. 'Who gonna run the ambulances?'

" 'Maybe the people what just live here,' he tell her, 'even if they don't have nice blue uniforms.' And he take another drink. Four, he has. 'Listen, sweetheart,' he say and he sound just like my Stefan when he make up his mind good, 'we go back to New York where the landlord he have to worry about keeping us warm and where the Japs and the Germans don't fill the streets with the dead and dying, like you say. Is too bad to leave all this danger to Sophie but I think she can take it.' He wink at me and he say, 'What about it, Sophie?'

" 'Is all right,' I say. 'I been in one war in the old country where is dead and dying people; wars is nothing new to me.'

"Mr. Marlowe, he put down the bottle he have in his hand again. 'By golly,' he say, 'I forgot that. Sure you been in a war. Tell me, Sophie, what uniform you wear in that war?'

" 'You making fun,' I say to him. 'You know

I don't wear no uniform. I don't fight. I just wear a pair of old pants.'

"I am not joking but Mr. Marlowe he laugh like anything. 'That is swell,' he say when he finish. 'You know what, Daisy,' he say to his wife, 'I think we buy Sophie a pair of new pants for this war. I like to do that. Is a bargain. No?' And then he laugh some more and he pick up the bottle and go out of the kitchen. Is no more argument but Mrs. Marlowe, she sit at the table and she cry. I don't feel good when I see somebody cry so I say something.

" 'I think maybe Mrs. Haley she don't know everything,' I say. 'I think you get plenty chances to help people in New York if the Germans come. You better take the uniform with you.'

"But Mrs. Marlowe shake her head at me. 'No, I leave it here till I come back in the spring,' she say. 'Put it in mothballs, Sophie. They don't need me in New York. They got plenty young women.' She look very sad and very old," Sophie commented.

8

Sophie's War-Evacué Practice

OUR TOWN HAS BEEN VERY EFFICIENT IN PREPARing for every eventuality of the war. Among other things, it has made a survey of its housing facilities with a view toward taking care of evacués from near-by cities. Shortly after Pearl Harbor, all residents of the community were interviewed to ascertain the number of

people they could shelter should the need arise. Making natural obeisance to blood kinship, many of us have put ourselves on record that, other things being equal, we would give first choice to relatives evacuated from bombarded cities. Sophie Halenczik and I are among those who fall into this group. Sophie's relatives are scattered in Bridgeport and New York; mine are concentrated in Mayor La Guardia's domain.

I had forgotten all about the program when Sophie announced one Friday that she was getting four evacués from New York. She had trouble with the word evacués but she made her meaning clear. They were relatives, she said, who had to leave New York because of the war.

"But nothing has happened, Sophie," I expostulated, confused at her remark.

"The war has happened," she declared with seeming logic.

"Sure," I said, "but New York hasn't been bombed."

"Oh, is not that," she replied. "They come

here so Anton – he is my nephew – he can get a job in the war factory in Bridgeport. My son-in-law, George, he is foreman now and when he go to New York on a visit last week he tell Anton what good wages they pay so Anton, he say they come here and he get a job with George. Anton he is married to an American girl and they got two children. Joey is eight and Shirley, she is six. Nice children, only very skinny."

George, according to Sophie's accounts, is the guiding spirit in the shell factory where he works. He has given jobs to all his friends and relatives and neighbors. Now, apparently, he was extending his sphere of influence to New York.

"They only stay with us until they find rooms in Bridgeport," Sophie explained. "Maybe a week or two. Is not bad."

Our town is about twenty miles from Bridgeport and many of our residents commute daily on buses which run to meet the three-shift schedule of the war plants.

"Won't it make things pretty crowded at

your place?" I asked Sophie, thinking of the little five-room house which already sheltered six people.

"We manage," Sophie answered. "Anton's family, they manage when we come to America. They live in four rooms but they take care of us. Five, we are. Me, Mary, Irene, Annie and Frankie. We sleep on the floor in the bedroom and we sleep on a bed in the kitchen. Anton's father, he buy a second-hand bed for two-and-a-half dollars, especially for us. When we come here to live in the country, we buy it from him, also for two-and-a-half dollars. Is still a good bed. I never forget what they do for us. So now we help them. We get along all right. Anyway, like I tell Annie, is just like a black-out."

"How do you mean like a black-out?" I asked, completely incapable of following her drift.

She shrugged her shoulders in a gesture which seemed to imply that I was a little slow-witted.

"Well," she explained, "we got to put out the lights when they blow the whistles. No? That

don't mean that the Germans, they are here. It is only for practice, like they say, so we know what to do when something real happens. So now we gonna have practice with relatives. Annie, she don't like it; she don't like to sleep with Shirley. But I tell her she must learn how to do it in case someday she have to. In wartimes you got to sleep together. No?"

With this remark she went to work and I heard no more about her evacués until the following Friday.

"Have your relatives come?" I asked as soon as I decently could. Sophie nodded her head but not with too much enthusiasm.

"They come last Sunday," she said. "I think I make a mistake," she added.

"Well, you did take on a pretty big load," I agreed.

"Not like that," she responded. "I make a mistake in cooking a big dinner. In the old country when relatives come from far away, you make a big dinner. Is like a party. So when I know that Anton and his family come on Sunday, I

tell Annie we must show them we are happy to have them. I kill two chickens and we have chicken soup with noodles, then chicken paprika with potatoes and dumplings and then we have apple strudel and coffee. Plenty things. They eat like it is Thanksgiving or Christmas. That is all right. I like people should eat good."

"What was wrong, then?" I said.

Sophie smiled wryly.

"Is nothing wrong then," she corrected me, accenting the last word. "Is wrong now. They think we eat all the time like we eat on Sunday. Anton – he get that job with George all right – he say to his wife, 'Now you gonna see, Elsie, how I used to eat when I was a kid.' And then he tell her all about goulash and veal paprika and meat balls and he tell the kids about all kinds of cakes from the old country. 'Aunt Sophie,' he say to them, 'is one swell cook.' And he go on and talk about the time we stay with them when we come to America and how I make something different every day for supper. He don't mean nothing but he remind me what his father do for me and my family when

we are greenhorns so what can I do? So every day when I come home from cleaning, I make something special what Anton remembers. They got wonderful appetites; they say the country air agree with them. And they drink coffee with sugar and cream like they grow on trees."

"I hope they're paying for it," I said, knowing how hard Sophie works for her money.

"They think they pay for it," she answered with a sigh. "When Anton ask me how much I charge them a week for board, I am ashamed. We don't pay nothing when we stay with his father. We don't have no money that time. So I say, 'Don't talk foolishness what you pay me, Anton. You are visitors, relatives.' But Anton, he stick his hand in his pocket and he say, 'Oh, no, Aunt Sophie, I gotta pay something. Is enough we get beds for nothing.' So he give me ten dollars and he say, 'Here, take this. Buy yourself something nice with it.' And I think is wonderful he is so good."

She picked up her brooms and dustcloths. "That is Sunday," she added laconically. "Yesterday I go to the bank and take out some

money. I am ashamed to tell Annie but I have nothing left in my pocketbook to buy things for supper. And Anton, he say last night it would be wonderful to have a goose for Sunday, stuffed with meat and rice."

"Well, it will be over when they get settled in Bridgeport," I offered in sympathy.

Again Sophie sighed.

"When they get settled," she repeated. "Elsie, she like to go right away. The children, also. They don't like the country. Is too quiet for them without no people and stores and movies. All the time when Anton come home, Elsie ask him if he find something. To make him feel good she say it is too hard for him to travel so much on a bus. Anton, he say he can find no rooms. The men in the factory, he say, tell him he is lucky to have relatives with a house. And he say he don't mind the bus trip when he know he come home to such good suppers. In New York, he say, he ride on the subway every night and when he come home, what he gets? Hamburger and potatoes and Jello for dessert. His wife ain't such a good cook, I think."

"You've got a problem, Sophie," I said.

"Sure," she answered. "That is what Annie call it. She is pretty mad."

Naturally I was interested in Sophie's problem and when she came the next week I asked her at once if her relatives were still with her. She nodded but while her eyes were troubled there was a smile on her lips.

"I think my Annie fix it," she said. "Is not so nice what she is doing but she say it ain't no time to be nice. She want to begin last Sunday but I don't let her. Is no time to fix things like that on Sunday. I cook that goose and he is wonderful. Anton say he never eat a goose like that and he never leave his Aunt Sophie. That is Sunday. But today I think, maybe, he don't say that no more."

"What exactly is Annie doing to fix things?" I asked, wishing that Sophie would get to the point.

"You got a war shelf in the cellar?" she asked me.

War shelves are part of the program of bom-

bardment preparation. Residents in our town have been instructed to hold in reserve on a special war shelf a sufficient amount of canned goods to keep the family fed for at least two weeks. Of course there are war shelves and war shelves. Mine consists entirely of things I have bought at the A & P. Sophie's has more variety, made up as it is of the vast amount of canning and preserving she did during the summer months. Not only has she put up vegetables, fruits and pickles but eggs and boiled chicken as well. Sophie is a marvel at such things and her family will eat well no matter what happens.

"You're eating off your war shelf," I said, arriving at the obvious conclusion.

"Yes and no," Sophie answered cryptically, grinning at me. "We eat off the grocery-store war shelf. Annie buy it last week. That Annie!"

"Let's have some coffee, Sophie," I said, shamelessly bribing her with the precious beverage. "It sounds like a riddle the way you say it."

"Is no riddle," Sophie answered, responding graciously to my suggestion. While the water

boiled, she talked. "Before Annie go to work on Saturday, she stop at the store and give a big order. She tell me not to touch it when it come but put it down cellar. She say she fix it up when she get home. That night we have a good supper, veal cutlets, cabbage strudel and *torte.* Then Anton, he invite us all to go to the movies but Annie say she don't feel so good and she wink at me so I say I must stay home with her. Everybody else go and then Annie and me, we go down the cellar and open up the boxes what come from the grocery store. But first Annie take down all the preserves I make and she hide them under the potatoes. I think she is crazy but she say she know what she is doing. Then she put the cans she buy on the war shelf. There is a whole lot of things, maybe four dozen. Is soups, vegetables, baked beans, sardines, spaghetti – things like that. She spend plenty, I think. I get mad and tell her we don't need such things but she just laugh. 'We make it a real war practice,' she say and then she tell me that Monday she gonna fix the supper."

"I'm beginning to see," I said to Sophie.

"Sure," said Sophie and went to get the pot of coffee. "So Monday, you know what we have for supper?"

"I can imagine," I declared.

"Was terrible," she commented, grinning at me over the rim of her coffee cup. "Canned soup, sardines and Jello what she fix in the morning. Anton, he look like he don't know what happens and he ask me if I am sick, maybe, because I don't cook that day. But Annie she say, 'No, Mom ain't sick. But if we gonna live like it is a war emergency—' that is what she call it—'we gonna eat like that, too. We got to get the practice,' she say.

"Tuesday," Sophie continued, "we eat more canned soup and this time Annie open up two cans of corned-beef hash. You know corned-beef hash? Is terrible. Wednesday more soup and liverwurst out of a can. Thursday, that is last night, she open up a couple cans soup and we have some boloney and some peas from a can. Tonight we have soup and spaghetti covered with tomato sauce from a can. Not even garlic in it. And all the time we have Jello for

dessert that Annie fix before she go to work. A different color every night. She just mix it with hot water and then she put it outside on the window sill to get cold. No fruit, no nothing in it. Is very bad. And no coffee. Only tea with condensed milk."

"Well, how's Anton taking it?" I asked.

Sophie giggled.

"He get awful mad last night when Shirley say when she see the boloney and peas, 'Look, Mamma. Boloney. Just like at home.' He tell her to shut up or he give her a good smack. And when Annie bring in the Jello – green it is last night – he get up from the table and go into his bedroom. My bedroom, I mean, but now he sleep there with Elsie. Elsie finish her Jello quick and then she go after him. We hear them talk, not the words but, you know, loud talking and it don't sound so nice. Annie just sit at the table and look happy. 'How you like baked beans Saturday night?' she ask Joey and Shirley, like baked beans is something wonderful, and Joey, he say, 'Sure. We always have baked beans Saturday night.'" Sophie groaned.

"I don't like baked beans. They make me sick in the stomach. But I must eat them tomorrow or Annie get mad."

"Your Annie is no fool," I said.

"No. Annie is pretty smart," Sophie agreed. "But it gonna kill me if I got to eat like that some more." A look of uncertainty came into her eyes. "And maybe it don't do no good. If they eat like that at home, maybe they just stay. Like Anton say, it save the rent for them, anyway."

"Annie'll find a way," I comforted her. "She'll probably take the blankets off the bed next."

"Featherbeds," Sophie corrected me. "We don't have blankets. Anton say he just love featherbeds. He don't have them since he is married." She looked thoughtful. "I think I tell Annie. Thanks."

In gratitude, possibly, for my suggestion about the beds Sophie called me up on Sunday morning and I knew from her voice that all was well again at her house. I was right. The relatives, she told me, were gone. Anton had

found some rooms in Bridgeport. She was even then cooking a chicken for dinner. It smelled something wonderful, she reported.

"You want some advice?" she added when I congratulated her on the happy resolution of her problem.

"Certainly," I said.

"You go to the committee and tell the ladies you don't want relatives from New York when the Germans come. You take people what you don't know. Annie say she gonna do that first thing tomorrow morning. She say is more patriotic like that, anyway."

9

Sophie Sells War Bonds

IT WAS NATURAL FOR MRS. THORNTON SCUDDER to suggest that Sophie Halenczik be included among the women chosen to sell war bonds at the Town Hall. Every Saturday afternoon and evening for the past few months someone has sat at a desk in the lobby of our town's impressive official center and urged people passing

through to the post office or to the auditorium, where there is always something going on, to invest in democracy. The wall behind the desk is draped with American flags; war posters complete the patriotic motif. Mrs. Scudder's nomination of Sophie, which, by the way, was followed by a unanimous vote, is rooted in respect for her as a person and as an American.

Sophie, of course, was extremely proud of the honor conferred upon her. Somebody thought it might be a good idea if she wore her native Czech costume for the occasion but Sophie vetoed that. She said she would wear her best Sunday clothes, the same as the other American ladies. On the Friday before the day on which she was to sell bonds, she came to work at our house as usual. She was very subdued. The responsibility of her service lay heavy upon her, not as a burden but as a precious privilege.

"I hope I sell a whole lot," she said to me before she went home. "I tell all the people I know what ain't born in this country they must come and buy bonds from me." She amended

the statement quickly. "Is not I want to keep them from the other ladies but I think is nice if they show in one day what good Americans they are. I think that is much better than to sing songs and make parades and to wear fancy clothes from the old country. No?"

"Yes," I agreed. "And I think others will come to buy bonds from you, too, Sophie."

"You?" she asked, picking up my remark with expert salesmanship.

"You bet," I answered.

I drove over to the Town Hall late Saturday evening. Mrs. Scudder and many of the women of her committee were standing around and talking near the desk where Sophie was officiating.

"How is it going?" I asked one of them.

"Marvelously," she answered. "Ernest Hopkins is simply wonderful."

Ernest Hopkins is still an admirer of Sophie's even though his predilection for weak tea and toast for supper instead of paprika chicken and strudel have put him out of the running as a

possible husband. Such things, according to Sophie, are important in making or breaking a marriage and I am sure she is right.

"What is Ernest doing?" I asked, at a loss to understand how he fitted into Sophie's bond-selling activities.

"Pulling them in," my informant told me. "He is barker, sandwich man and general campaign manager rolled into one. He's been making the rounds of the general store, the A & P, the ice-cream parlor and the barber's, talking to everybody and urging people to pile up a record sale tonight. He prods the shy ones and pushes the reluctant. There he is now."

I turned to look and there was Ernest, lean and grizzled, leading a woman, her arms full of bundles, to Sophie's desk.

"I just met your friend at the butcher's counter," he called out to Sophie. "She wants a war bond."

"Oh, Mrs. Kremanski, I know you don't disappoint me," came Sophie's voice in happy response. "How much you want?"

I don't know how much Mrs. Kremanski

wanted but whatever it was, it was good. The whole scene was good, the people standing about, the cheerful interchange of casual talk, the activity at Sophie's desk. The atmosphere was warm and friendly and somehow deeply American. I made my purchase of Sophie and was on the point of leaving when the entrance of Chet Blanchard, propelled by Ernest, stopped me.

Chet Blanchard is in every way a difficult man to deal with. He owns a large farm and unlike many of his neighbors makes money running it. The house he lives in was built by the first Blanchard who settled in this country, in colonial days. He has a reputation for flowery oratory and is bitter over the fact that he has never succeeded in getting the nomination for the state legislature. Locally chauvinistic to an almost maniacal degree, he has not only refused to sell any of his land to outsiders, but has been known to buy adjoining parcels of acreage he neither wanted nor needed to keep them away. All residents of our town who cannot share his

tradition of background he divides into two groups. They are either damn New Yorkers or dirty foreigners. It gave me a jolt, therefore, to see him heading for Sophie's desk, guided by the success-elated Ernest. Sophie, I am sure, was equally surprised for she knows the man's extravagant intolerance is a byword but, with more poise than I could have mustered in the circumstances, she greeted him warmly.

"How do you do, Mr. Blanchard?" I heard her say. "You come to buy a bond from me?"

Chet Blanchard stopped like a mule in his tracks and pushed Ernest's hand away from him, giving him a baleful look as he did it. For a moment he did not speak and then he bellowed his answer at her in a manner that made a united audience of the scattered groups of people in the lobby.

"No," he shouted. "I buy bonds from Americans, not from dirty foreigners. Hopkins didn't tell me who was selling them."

I saw Mrs. Scudder move over to Sophie and stand protectingly over her.

"Chet Blanchard, you ought to be ashamed

of yourself," she began but before she could say any more, Sophie stopped her.

"Please, Mrs. Scudder, I talk to Mr. Blanchard." She lifted her dark eyes to the man glowering down at her. "Is all right for you to buy a bond from me, Mr. Blanchard," she said. "I am an American."

"The hell you are," he answered and his voice echoed loudly through the large, high-vaulted lobby. "You don't even know what an American is."

"Maybe no," came Sophie's quiet reply. "Please tell me what is an American. I like to know."

Her words obviously floored him. He opened his mouth and shut it, looked fiercely around him at the attentive faces and, finding no support there, made as if to go, but Ernest Hopkins stopped him.

"Well, why don't you tell her, Chet? You started this."

"All right, I'll tell her," Blanchard declared, his face now red with anger. He dug his hands deep into the pockets of his heavy sheepskin

jacket and squared his massive shoulders. "I am an American," he said with hard emphasis. "My people came to Connecticut almost two hundred years ago. They made this country. They worked hard to clear the forests and till the soil. There was a Blanchard in every war this country has ever fought. That's what makes an American."

Sophie listened to his words, nodding in approval as he made each statement.

"I think is wonderful what you say," she said when he finished. "I like best of all the first thing you say. Your people come here long ago and they make this country. They work hard. Maybe you tell me why they come here, Mr. Blanchard?"

Incredulity spread over the blustering features of the man.

"What do you mean why they come here?" he repeated. "They came here for the same reasons that all the early settlers did. That's history. You wouldn't know about that."

"Yes, I know about that," Sophie answered amiably. "I know what is written in the history

books. Dolores, my granddaughter, she study from them. When she is doing her homework she tell me. She tell me the old Americans come to this country because they ain't happy where they are born. She read me a wonderful story about the Pilgrims. The Pilgrims are people what ain't allowed to pray like they want to in the old country. So they all get on a ship and they come here. And the first thing they do when they get off the ship is pray like they want to. Maybe your people come on this wonderful ship. No?"

"No," shouted Blanchard. "The Pilgrims came here in 1620. The Blanchards came to Connecticut in 1750. Religion had nothing to do with it. John Blanchard, the first settler, was a great man who loved freedom and independence. He was a pioneer, a man who answered the challenge of a new world rich with promise and opportunity."

"He's off," a man whispered but a murmur of disapproval from the crowd hushed him. It was Sophie's answer they wanted to hear.

"I cannot say it so beautiful like you," came

Sophie's reply in her peculiar accent. "I don't speak English so good. But we come this country for the same things like Mr. John Blanchard. When my husband, Stefan, is sick and knows he is going to die, he tell me to take the children to America because it is a wonderful country where everybody have a chance to live good. In Bohemian it sound just so beautiful like what you say. We come here in 1929 and we work hard, too. We are Americans just like your first grandfather because we come for the same things and we do the same things. No?"

"No!" Blanchard bellowed at her in fury he made no effort to suppress. "John Blanchard was no foreigner. He was a patriot who fought and bled for this country. His sons and grandsons after him fought and bled for this country. They fought at the Battle of Bunker Hill, at Gettysburg, at the Marne. They've given their blood for America. The graveyard behind the Congregational Church is full of Blanchards."

I saw Sophie's hands tighten in a clasp as she held them on the desk.

"Look, Mr. Blanchard," she said and her

voice was that of a mother arguing with a stubborn child. "I know is true what you say. Your family fight in all the wars. Sure. Why not? If my family would be here in this country when your family fight those battles, they would be soldiers too. All the Halencziks and Piseks — that is my family — they was good soldiers in the old country. When is trouble, they fight. Is too bad we come here too late for the wars that is already finished. But now we are here. And my Frankie is a soldier in this war. He is now in Australia." Her voice quavered a bit but she went bravely on. "Maybe Frankie give his life for America. I hope not. I hope he come back alive. But you say your family is buried in the cemetery back of the Congregational Church. If Frankie die in this war, I don't know where he is buried. But he is still a good American. No? A cemetery don't make Americans."

"Woman," shouted Blanchard in his best oratorical manner, "have you no respect for the dead?"

"But yes," answered Sophie patiently. "I have a whole lot respect for dead people. Before we

take the ship to America, I go to the cemetery and I say good-by to my husband and to all my grandfathers and grandmothers. I go to church and light candles for them. I give the priest money to say a special mass for them. They are good people, my relatives. They work hard like your people. The men fight in the wars. The women, they take good care of the homes. But I think is a mistake to say you are a wonderful American because you have a lot of dead relatives who are buried in this country. That is all I mean."

She threw her hands out in a gesture of reasonable finality. But it was not finished.

"My dead relatives, as you call them, stand for freedom and democracy!" Chet Blanchard thundered at her.

A spark of anger flared in Sophie's eyes.

"But not you!" she retorted, her patience spent. "Not you, Mr. Blanchard. You don't stand for freedom and democracy."

"Easy there, Sophie," came Ernest's voice out of the dead silence that followed.

"No, go on, Sophie." It was Mrs. Scudder who

stood like an avenging angel over Sophie. "I think Chet has it coming to him."

"Is finished, Mrs. Scudder," Sophie answered, her voice now drained of emotion. "Is just I get mad when people think they are good Americans because they have lots of graves in the cemetery. I think they forget other things. Maybe they don't forget. Maybe they don't know."

"What things, Sophie?" Mrs. Scudder gently urged her.

Sophie shook her head.

"Is hard to explain," she replied. She wrinkled her brows. "Is something like this. If you are used to good things, you don't know how to be glad for them. You buy a rich child a pair of new shoes and is nothing to him. He always have good shoes. You buy a poor child who always go barefoot or maybe who always have to wear old shoes some new shoes and it is wonderful for him. It make him happy. No? All right. You are born in this country. Maybe you don't know how wonderful it is, how you are the same like everybody else, how your

children go to school, get good jobs, have a nice house, go to the movies. But if you come from the old country, you know. Is like coming from a dark place where nothing grows good to a place with sunshine. That is why a greenhorn can be a good American the minute he is off the ship. Just like those Pilgrims what pray and thank God they are here."

She shook her head as if the words she had just uttered didn't wholly satisfy her. In obvious anguish her eyes searched the faces of the people crowded around her desk, seeking some inspiration for greater eloquence and clarity. The town banker was there, the postmaster, a selectman and others who had been attracted to the scene by Blanchard's thundering voice. Sophie's face suddenly lit up.

"Look!" she exclaimed. "I think right here is what I mean. "*Here*," she repeated with emphasis. "Mr. Blanchard, he make an argument with me because his people come here a long time ago and because I come to this country only a few years ago. He say what he think and I say what I think. And everybody listen

to both of us. Why? Because we are both Americans. You think such things can happen in the old country where those Nazis are?"

"You're damn right they can't," Chet Blanchard, who had had enough of Sophie, answered angrily, not realizing the implication of his words.

There was a moment of horrified silence and then a roar of hearty laughter followed Blanchard's shameful retreat to the door. Sophie was the only one who did not laugh. "Anyone like to buy a bond?" she asked.

10

Sophie Buys a Present

THE ONLY COMMENT SOPHIE HALENCZIK EVER made about our house which she has regularly cleaned for several years was the first time she came to see us. She had apparently never seen a two-story living room with a balcony and I think she was impressed. "It look like a church," she said, and then added practically, "Is hard

to keep a church warm in the wintertime." What her private opinion was of the way our house is furnished, she never divulged. I was a little surprised, therefore, when without any preamble she asked me one day what I had paid for some of the pieces in the living room. She was particularly interested in the sofa and the two armchairs that sit at each side of the fireplace.

"Is not a suit?" she questioned.

"No," I answered. "They were bought separately."

"I wonder about that," she declared. "I tell the children that nothing match in your house. I think maybe you get a bargain that way." She seemed a little perplexed that I had paid what she considered a large sum for pieces that didn't match. But beneath her perplexity I could feel a fever of personal excitement.

"Are you buying some new furniture for your house?" I asked her and her face broke into a wide smile.

"I buy new furniture but not for my house. Is good enough what I got till Dolores grow up

and have boy friends. No, not for my house I buy a beautiful parlor suit in Bridgeport. Blue plush with flowers all over. Is wonderful spring and cushions. Like a bed. I get it cheap because is a sale. They only got two more left, red and green." Her smile grew wider. "My Annie, she get married to Jim next week. Is for her the suit. The store keep it till she want it."

"Congratulations!" I exclaimed. "This calls for a celebration."

"Coffee," said Sophie extravagantly.

More than any other of her children Annie, Sophie's youngest daughter, has inherited her mother's charm and generosity and good sense. If ever there is a crisis in the family, Annie can be depended upon to meet it. Moreover, this daughter is especially dear to Sophie because, as she puts it, Annie is a real American. She has a diploma from our local grammar school, she has a job in a beauty parlor where she meets the best people of the community and she has been going regularly with a young mechanic whose family roots go back to Revolutionary days. "Imagine," Sophie had said to me when she first spoke of Jim Roberts, "his people live in

the same house for almost two hundred years. Someday my Annie, she will live there. Is wonderful. No?"

Jim, Sophie informed me, was going to an officers' training school after he and Annie came back from a week's honeymoon in New York. "They don't take him in the draft," she explained, "because he take care of his parents. Now his father have a watchman job in a war factory and Jim can go. But he want to get married first. He say he want to have a Mrs. James Roberts to wait for him." She glowed at the sound of the name. "Annie," she went on, "she stay with us until the baby come. Later, maybe, she live with his folks. Is more room there."

"Baby?" I said.

"Oh, is not how you think," Sophie expostulated. "My Annie is a good girl. But if she get married, there is a baby. No? Annie hope she get one for sure. The war change everything." A shadow passed over her face. "I want Annie she should be happy but I always hope she keep her promise to me."

"What kind of promise?" I asked, curious to

know the cause of Sophie's disappointment in her daughter. Sophie stirred her coffee vigorously.

"You know about the other children. No?" She was lost in thought for a moment. "Mary," she went on, "she have Dolores but she never have a husband. That happen a long time ago, when we first come to this country. Then Irene. Irene she have a baby but she get married after he is born. And Frankie. You know about my Frankie. He get Margie in trouble when he is at camp and he go away to Australia. Now we have Margie and the baby but Frankie, he don't want to marry her. Then there is Annie."

Sophie's tender feeling for Annie was obvious in the warmth of her voice when she spoke the girl's name. "Annie, she is different. She never like the way those babies come. She always say there gonna be one Halenczik in the family what get married first and have the baby afterward. She say to me, 'I promise you, Mom, that when I get married there will not be a baby for a whole year, anyway.' I like to hear that. Is

more American. But there is no war when she say that. Now she cannot wait a year. She want to have a baby right away."

"American girls aren't waiting a year now, either," I consoled Sophie.

"Sure. I know," she agreed. "Mrs. Manning's daughter what go to college, she marry a soldier and have a seven-month baby. Mrs. Manning say it run like that in the family." Sophie made no comment but she grinned slyly at me. "Mrs. Manning is real old-time American. She belong to a society where all the people have relatives who come to this country long ago on the same ship." Sophie wrinkled her brows in an effort to recall the name of the ship.

"The *Mayflower*," I prompted her.

"Yes. That is it," she said. "We come to this country on a ship that goes from Hamburg but I forget the name. You think is important to remember the name?"

"No," I assured Sophie.

"You know what Mrs. Manning give her daughter for a wedding present? She buy her linen tablecloths and napkins what cost a hun-

dred dollars. She tell me that herself when I clean her house."

"Mrs. Manning's a rich woman," I offered, thinking that Sophie was unduly impressed by the gift.

She gave me a triumphant smile.

"You know what I pay for the parlor suit for Annie? One hundred and forty-nine dollars!"

"Great Scott, Sophie!" I exclaimed. "That's a whole lot of money."

"Sure," she agreed complacently, enormously pleased at my response. "And maybe I buy the red one for Frankie when he get married to Margie. Frankie is crazy for red. I write him that."

"That's practically three hundred dollars," I declared. "Rich people aren't so generous with their money." I had been on the point of saying extravagant but thought better of it. From what Sophie had told me, I knew that three hundred dollars represented more than half of her savings.

"No," said Sophie, "rich people got to be more stingy than is poor people. You know why? Be-

cause rich people, they live on interest. Frankie once explain that to me. He say they got a lot of money in the bank what they never touch and they buy everything with the interest from this money. Is right?"

"That's about it," I said.

"Well," Sophie continued, "with poor people is different. They work for a living. If they got a few dollars left over after they buy clothes and things to eat and pay the taxes and insurance, they put it in the bank. All right. I have five, six hundred dollars in the bank. How much it make? Ten, twelve dollars a year. Can I live on that? No. When Mrs. Manning take out a hundred dollars from the bank is a lot of money for her because she need that to pay her bills. That is all she have because she don't work like I do. All right. When I take out a hundred dollars from the bank, what it mean? Maybe two dollar interest. Is nothing. I spend so much when I treat the girls to a movie.

"I don't save my money to live on," Sophie went on. "I never have enough for that. I save it for something special. No? The wedding of

my Annie is something special. And if Frankie get married to Margie like I want, is something special, too. Maybe you say I should save it because someday I get sick and cannot work. That what George, Irene's husband, say. I don't like talk like that. I don't get sick. I work for a long time yet. And I get more pleasure now when I buy a nice present for Annie and maybe for Frankie than I get twenty, thirty years from now when I get sick. I got plenty time to save for that. Anyway," she added, "is worth a hundred and fifty dollars if Frankie marry Margie."

Her face grew sad.

"You know, he is a fool, my Frankie. Maybe not a fool but stubborn like a pig. If he make up his mind once he don't change it, even if he want to. Margie make a wonderful wife for him. She is a beautiful girl and she work hard. She got a job now with Mrs. Scudder and Mrs. Scudder say she never have a maid so good like her. She say any man should be proud to have her for a wife."

"It might be a good idea if you wrote that to Frankie," I suggested.

Sophie searched my face for a moment.

"I think maybe you know what I do," she said. "But no. How can you know if I do not tell you?"

"Tell me what?" I queried.

"You know the nephew of Mrs. Scudder?" she asked me. "The one what is an officer what flies."

I shook my head.

"He is a captain but young. Maybe twenty-six, twenty-eight years. Couple months ago, he have a few days' vacation from the Army. How you call it?"

"Leave," I prompted.

"Yes. That is it. Anyway he come to stay with Mrs. Scudder. Margie, she serve the dinner and he talk to her. He ask Mrs. Scudder if he can take Margie to a dance and Mrs. Scudder, she say, why not if Margie want to go with him. When Margie tell me I say sure she should go. Is patriotic to dance with soldiers even if she have fun. When he come to get her I can see he is happy to go out with a girl what look so nice. She wear a green dress that is wonderful with

her red hair. Annie give her a manicure and wave. Margie is all right. You know what she do before they go? She bring the baby from the bedroom and she show him to Mrs. Scudder's nephew. 'What you think of my son?' she say to him. 'I think he is swell,' he say. What you think of that?"

"I think Margie's swell," I answered.

"Sure," said Sophie. "That what I mean. She don't have to do that. So they have a good time all the days he is with his aunt and before he go he ask Mrs. Scudder to take a picture of him and Margie together for a souvenir. They are both smiling. So when I get that picture I think I send it to Frankie to show him that a captain is happy to be with Margie. First I think I also send him a picture of Margie and the baby but then I say, 'No. That is not good. Is better Frankie see her like a girl what is popular with captains than like a mother. I know my Frankie. So I just send the picture with the nephew."

"And have you heard from Frankie since?"

Sophie's eyes evaded mine.

"Oh, yes, I hear from him all right," she an-

swered. "Last week I get a letter from him. You know what that devil do? He send us a picture of himself and a girl in Australia. He have his arm around her and they are both laughing. Not just smiling but laughing. And he write in his letter he is having a fine time and the girls in Australia are wonderful. He don't say one word about Margie."

"It didn't work then."

Sophie shrugged her shoulders.

"That I do not know for sure. Maybe it work, like you say. Maybe he take that picture because he don't want to show he care. Frankie, he is like that. But I don't give up. Now I write him that Annie is getting married to Jim and that I buy her a wonderful blue parlor suit for a hundred and forty-nine dollars. I tell him when he get married to Margie, he get the same thing in red. I see what he say to that."

11

A Letter from Frankie

SEVERAL WEEKS AFTER THE MARRIAGE OF HER youngest daughter, Sophie arrived one Friday morning looking very white and drawn. Before I could make any comment on her appearance she said quietly, "Frankie is in the war." Seeing my expression of surprise, for I knew that Frankie had for months been stationed with the American Army in Australia, she added, "I mean now he is fighting. We get a letter this week what say they give the Japs hell."

"He'll be all right," I said tritely, at a loss for other words to comfort her.

"I pray," she answered simply. "That help us both." She began collecting her cleaning materials. "You know," she added with a brave smile, "that is the nicest letter we ever get from Frankie. Always before he write big. The country is wonderful, the things to eat is wonderful, the girls is wonderful. Everything is wonderful like a picnic. Sometimes I think he forget he is in the war. I mean he forget why he is there. When I talk to Annie about it, she say, 'Don't worry. He learn quick enough.' That letter show he begin to learn. He is more grown-up but is also more like a child, a good child. He write how he think of home, of the kitchen where he eat, of the good goulash and strudel he like so much. He say he wish he have a picture of the kitchen with me by the stove 'dishing out the chow.' That is how he say it. He say it will be wonderful when the Japs and Germans is licked and he is back again in that kitchen. He ask if we have snow and if the snow plow come on our road. Always we have trouble

with the snow plow because we live on a back road. He say is nothing but rain and mud and mosquitoes where he is and he like to think of the house and woodshed all covered with snow. He hope we keep plenty warm." Sophie's voice grew a little husky. "That show he is changed. Always before when he write he say when the war is over he gonna live in a big city. No more hick towns for him, he say. Now he like to remember all about the hick town. He ask Annie a lot of things about all the people he know. He always write the letters to Annie," Sophie explained. "When he is home, they fight all the time but they are good friends, anyway. He don't know yet she is married to Jim."

"Then he never got your letter telling him you'd buy him a red-plush parlor set if he married Margie?"

She shook her head. "No, he don't know. I think he leave Australia before the letter come. Now it sound foolish. What he care for a red-plush parlor suit where he is? He like to think of old things, not new. Anyway, when I tell Margie about that letter after I send it, she

laugh. I don't tell her I give them the present if Frankie marry her but I say I give it *when* she marry Frankie. It sound nicer like that. No? Margie she laugh in a funny way and she pat my hand. Then she say and she look away from me, 'Red is a bad color for me because I got red hair.' But Frankie is crazy for red I tell her and she answer, 'That is too bad.' I don't understand what she mean by that. Then this week when Frankie's letter come and Annie, she read it when we are eating supper, Margie look very pale. I think she wait for Frankie to say something about her but he don't. He just send his love to all the folks at home. I think he mean her and the baby but I am afraid to say something. Next morning Margie she ask Annie to mail a letter for her and Annie tell me later the address is *Captain William Thornton.* That is the nephew of Mrs. Scudder. You know, like I tell you, they go to dances when he is here."

"Well, you can't blame her," I said.

"No," declared Sophie, "I don't blame her. Is not every day a girl find a wonderful man like that captain. She get a lot of postcards from him

and he ask her to write if she got time. But I don't let her forget Frankie. Every time the baby do something cute, I say that is just what Frankie do when he is a baby. Maybe I say it too much because last night, when the baby pull her hair and laugh and I say that about Frankie, her face get a little angry and she say, 'I know all about Frankie's cute ways.' And then she put the baby on the floor and go into the bedroom." Sophie sighed heavily. "Is too much trouble in the world. But," she added, "when Annie take that picture of the kitchen to send to Frankie, I gonna have the baby in the high chair."

Although Frankie didn't write exactly where he was fighting the Japs, it was clear from the reports Sophie gave me of his letters in the ensuing weeks that he was either in New Guinea or the Solomon Islands. He wrote of the natives, of the heat, of the fever that was prevalent among the men. And, as Sophie declared, he gave indications of growing up. "It show a man is growing up," she explained, "when he write

all the time of the good things what he remembers and of the things he is going to do when he come back. No? Before, Frankie don't remember nothing and he don't want to think from nothing he will do tomorrow or next year. He only want to think how he can have a good time now."

One Friday she reported that Frankie had at last received that letter she had sent him. "He send Annie a fifty-dollar war bond for a wedding present," she told me with pride. "Imagine! Frankie! When Frankie give a present like that, it show for sure he is different."

"Did he say anything about your offer of a wedding present to him?" I asked.

Her brows knit in perplexity.

"Yes," she answered. "I don't know if it is good or bad. He say just what Margie say. He say red is all wrong for Margie. What you think about that? Is good or is bad?"

"I think it's good," I replied. "It shows he remembers her."

"Thanks," said Sophie.

It was several weeks after we had this talk

that Sophie brought me the letter from Frankie. Ordinarily when Sophie has exciting news to relate, she leads up to it with remarks designed to whet my curiosity. This time, she had hardly entered the house when she said, "Frankie, he have malaria."

"I'm sorry, Sophie," I said.

"Oh, is all right," she answered, her voice ringing with elation. "He is better now." She opened her handbag and brought forth a much thumbed envelope. "From Frankie," she explained. "Is wonderful. Is all about Margie. I bring it to you to read."

Interested as I was, I felt a little reluctant about reading Frankie's mail, but Sophie pushed the letter into my hand. "Read it," she said. I opened it and started reading to myself when Sophie stopped me. "You read it loud, please."

"But you know it," I objected.

"Sure," she agreed, "but when is something good, is nice to hear it a lot of times." She sat down at the table and folded her hands on it.

"Dear Annie [the letter started],

"I am writing this from a hospital bed. Don't let that worry you. I'm O.K. now but I've been

sick as hell with malaria and stomach trouble, the kind we used to get when we were kids and ate too many green apples. It wasn't only me. A lot of the men came down with the same thing. It was tough while it lasted but believe it or not, kid, I'm not sorry I went through it. I mean it went through me. Joke. Ha, ha."

"That Frankie," Sophie commented smiling. "All the time he makes jokes. Even when he is worried like he say next."

"Keep this under your hat for a while [I read]. But I'm worried like hell. It's about Margie. I've been a heel about her."

I looked up in embarrassment at this intimate confession and found Sophie beaming at me.

"That is good. No? 'I been a heel about her.' Annie explain to me what is a heel. Go on, please."

"I don't know where to begin [the letter went on]. You know what I said about her when I heard she had showed up home. I said how the hell did I know that baby she was going to have was my kid. Gee, when I think I said that I get the chills and fever all over again. Honest.

Even when you wrote me what Mom said about the birthmark that was just like the old man's, I said to myself that it was just a lot of boloney. Lots have kids have birthmarks and so what."

"He not such a fool, that Frankie," said Sophie, giving me a conspiratory look.

"But I found out the truth about Margie when I was sick [I read]. I told you a lot of the fellers was sick at the same time. One of them was a guy called Slim Henderson. He was at Camp Lee with me but I kinda lost track of him in Australia. We was in different outfits. Anyway, he had the bed next to me."

"Now come the good part," Sophie interrupted me.

"One day, when I was feeling a little better [the letter said], I was sitting up in bed reading over some of the letters from home and looking at some of the snaps you sent me. One dropped on the floor and Slim who was sitting at the side of his bed picked it up for me. It was the picture of Margie and the captain."

"Oh, is good, is good I send that picture, Sophie murmured in ecstatic tones.

"'Gee,' said Slim, 'that's Margie Nelson. And with a captain.' 'What's it to you?' I said, getting sore. You know me, Annie, quick on the trigger when it comes to getting sore. 'Nothing,' said Slim. 'Not a damn thing. I tried hard enough to get to first base with that girl but no go. She was a decent kid if ever there was one.'"

"I know it all the time," declared Sophie. "When she get so mad when we ask her if she want some money, I know she is a good girl. Go on, please."

"'What do you mean?' I asked Slim, getting the creeps [Frankie continued]. 'Hell,' he said, 'what do you think I mean? Margie was a good sport with the boys. She gave them funny backtalk and danced with them but nothing more. I fell pretty hard for that redhead,' he said. 'I even asked her to marry me. You know what she said?'"

"Now it come," said Sophie with a blissful sigh.

"'She said [the letter went on] that I was a nice guy, that the camp was full of nice guys, but the right one hadn't showed up yet.' And

then he said, 'I guess she was a smart kid to hold everything for a captain in the air service. I knew that girl was high class.' You can imagine how I felt [Frankie wrote]. The next day I talked some more to Slim about Margie and gee, Annie, what a dumb son-of-a-gun I've been. I was nuts about her at camp but you know me. Just because she fell for me, I thought she was a phony. Now I can't get her out of my mind. It aint just the baby, its her. I aint often asked you for help, not with Janes anyway, but this is different. If you can think of anything I can say or do to make it straight with her, please let me know. She's been living with you so you ought to know what'll go over big with her. It burns me up when I think of that captain. I've cut the picture and torn up his mug. I wish it was as easy to get rid of him in real life."

Sophie couldn't contain her joy at these words.

"Is wonderful. Is wonderful," she repeated. "He want to get rid of the captain."

There was little more to the letter. He ended with a message of love for the family. "And I mean Margie and the baby, too," he wrote. A

short postscript came after his signature. "Could you send me a snapshot of Stevie? I'd like to see what the kid looks like."

Sophie's eyes were full of happy tears when I looked up.

"Is better than the movies. No?" she said, blowing her nose hard. "Everything gonna be wonderful."

"Does Margie know about this letter?" I asked.

"No," said Sophie, "Annie gonna keep it under her hat like Frankie say. We talk about it and she say Frankie must write to Margie himself. She say if he feel like a man he must act like a man. She write him and tell him to make a clean breast of it. That how she say it, 'clean breast of it.' And she send him a lot of pictures of Stevie. Frankie go crazy when he see them, is such a wonderful baby." Again she blew her nose. "Frankie will be all right now," she declared with assurance. "He settle down. Just like his father. Before I marry Stefan Halenczik, he is wild and people talk about him but after he get

married he make a wonderful husband. Imagine," she added reflectively. "It take the war to make a man from Frankie."

I wondered a little how Margie, who had shown wholesome signs of independence, would respond to Frankie's change of heart, but said nothing of this to Sophie. She was too happy and I couldn't bear to spoil it by injecting any doubts or fears. I needn't have worried. The following week when Sophie came to work, her good news was written all over her face.

"That Frankie," she said and her voice held amusement and pride and love. "That Frankie," she repeated. "You think he wait to get Annie's letter? No. He don't wait for no help, like he say. Sunday, Margie get a telegram from him, all the way from where he is. You know what it say?" She paused a moment to give the full effect of its dramatic contents. "It say LET'S SETTLE FOR A GREEN PARLOR SUIT FOR A WEDDING PRESENT. LOVE. WRITING." She laughed joyously, "Is all finished. Already I pay a deposit on the green suit. Margie go with me. Is wonderful? No?"

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